



LEARNING WITH CASE STUDIES
PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO THE LARGE
CLASS CHALLENGE

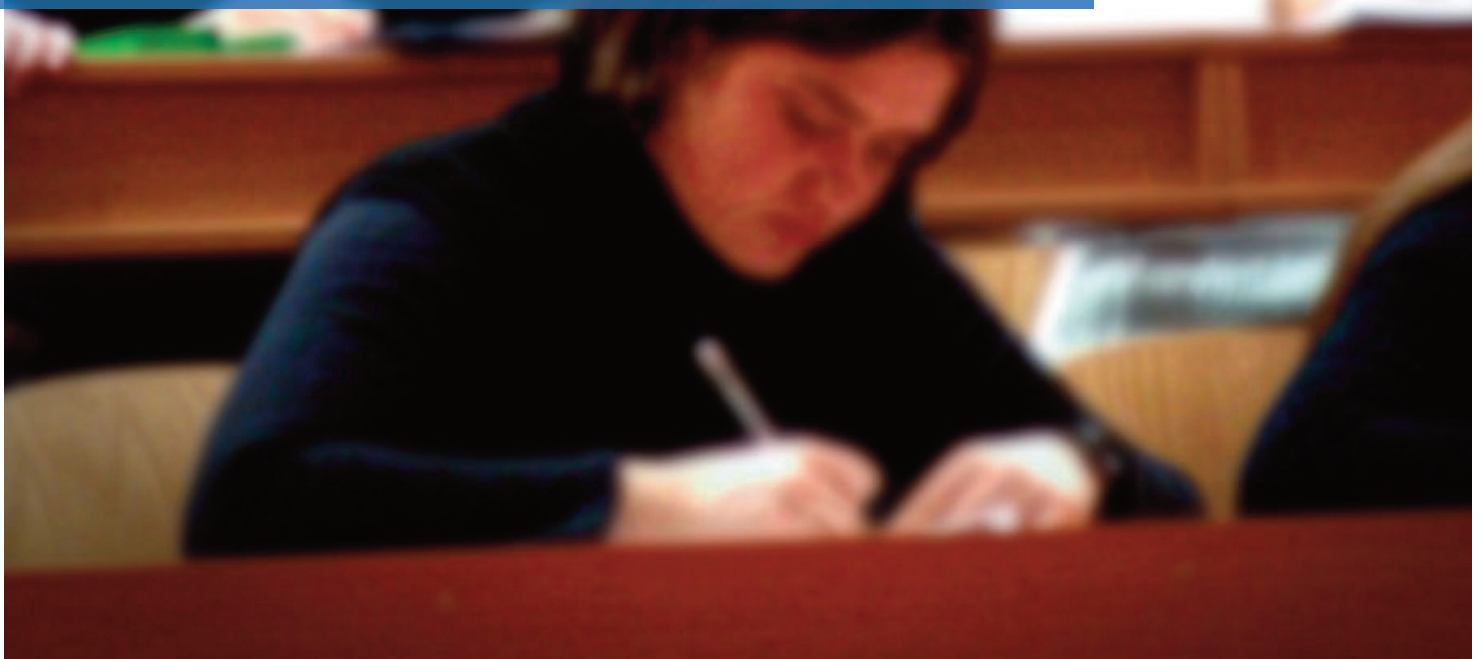
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How can we ensure that students using cases in large classes prepare the case in advance, work collectively, make meaningful contributions, ask questions of each other, participate in large class discussions....AND... achieve a valuable learning experience?



Case-based teaching is widely advocated as a means of offering benefits both within and beyond the curriculum in the teaching of accounting and accounting-related subjects. However, the practical application of this teaching approach has tended towards use with smaller class sizes and with learners who have some prior practical experience to apply to the underlying theoretical issues of the case. Restrictions are imposed by the constraints of the built environment and the time available to both educator and student. In addition, concerns regarding the rigour, fairness and validity of assessment present particularly in the context of large class settings.

The Large Class Challenge

Students:

- Participation
- Collective Learning
- Peer Interaction

Educators:

- Managing the process
- Facilitating multiple viewpoints
- Assessment

This article reports the findings of an action research project investigating how a group of accounting and finance educators addressed some of the practical challenges of using case studies with large classes.

Large class settings pose challenges for students and educators alike. For students, while participation is more challenging it also becomes easier to 'hide' in the larger group. Students are also less likely to know each other, and so the potential of the case method to promote collective learning (where students learn with each other) is harder to harness. Peer interaction (students learning from each other) is also difficult. In large group settings students can be reluctant to question

each other even though the teaching context is one that calls for a more active learning approach. Student presentations of case analyses and solutions can become repetitive, leading to disengagement. Consequently, the educator is challenged to find ways to facilitate multiple viewpoints while facing the constraints of scheduled class times and the need for highly structured protocols to manage the process. In addition, consideration of the multiple learning activities offered and assessable under a case-based strategy can become resource intensive and appear insurmountable. However, all is not lost!

Designed using a three-stage action research method, a number of novel approaches to case delivery and discussion were tested. The objective was to ensure that students in large classes using cases would prepare the case study in advance, work collectively, make presentations, ask questions of each other, and participate in large class discussions. In this way they would have an enhanced learning experience. Based on this experience the following key factors were identified as critical to successfully using case studies in large classes.

Students welcome novelty

Student engagement and satisfaction are increased where a case itself is interesting and rich in data, and description is utilised in an unexpected and novel format. For example, convening Board Meetings to decide on a takeover bid, presenting aspects of the case as motions to be argued

Objective:

To develop methods of using case studies to create a valuable learning experience:

- With groups of 70 or more students
- Using not more than 2-hour time slots
- Using traditional lecture rooms
- With no tutorial support

using a debate format, or assembling a number of concurrent Family Councils to decide the future of a family business. The case chosen should lend itself to the activity.

Students require clear direction

Students need to know what is expected of them in advance of the case class. The use of clear, concise class protocols that include the order and nature of pre-class and in-class activities, and the amount of time allocated for each, can go far in meeting this requirement. Students are also quick to recognise educator time and effort put into the drafting of such protocols.

Work must be assigned before class

To harness the full potential of case-based learning strategies, students should be assigned specific

tasks prior to a case study session. This would allow students to concentrate their time prior to class on a focused and directed analysis rather than a mere assembly of case details. Students are more likely to have read and prepare the case in advance of class if they see that the preparatory work has a clear output in the planned in-class activities.

Collective learning needs engineering

Collective learning, via small group work, allows students to learn from each other and allows for the emergence and exploration of different perspectives. However, effort is needed to help students avoid the temptation to simply divide up the preparatory tasks and work as individuals, as well as address the potential of 'free rider' problems. Ways to prevent this include signalling to students (as part of the class protocols distributed in

Learning with Case Studies in Large Class Settings		
Essential components	What can go wrong?	Addressed by ...
A case that is relevant, rich and interesting	Case is poorly written/out-of-date/too detailed; Students assemble rather than analyse data.	Change the questions; Add on to or delete data from the original case.
Students can read the case in advance	Students turn up to class not having read or prepared the case, or maybe even without a copy.	Circulate clear protocols in advance; Assign marks for pre-class preparation outputs.
Small group analysis (pre-class/in class)	'Free rider' issues; Students subdivide the tasks and work as individuals; Students fail to complete the task.	Observe students working; Design should provide for any student to be asked about any aspect; Harness competitive instincts.
Presentation of analysis/ results/output/decisions to the class as a whole by small group	Boring for non-presenters; Repetitive, if same topic addressed repeatedly; Students are inattentive; Errors in student presentations go unchecked.	A nominated role for everyone in the group; Each group handles a different aspect; A further assignment building on contributions from each group; Time allowed for general feedback to correct errors.
Large class discussion, moving from the particulars of the case, to the general issue(s) under consideration	Lack of spontaneous interaction, silence, or the daft contribution; Boredom; Embarrassment.	Pick groups instead of individuals; Orchestrate constructive confrontation; Links to the ultimate case assignment.

advance) that any student can be asked about any aspect of the small group task or by harnessing the competitive instincts of students by getting small groups to compete against each other.

Each student needs to have a voice

Students value the opportunities case-based learning offers to develop soft skills that will be valued in a future workplace, as well as skills in analysis, interpretation and decision making. Significantly, even those students who do not relish tasks relating to group work and presentations recognise that the benefits to be gained are substantial enough to merit moving beyond the boundaries of their comfort zone with less active teaching approaches. Again, establishing clear protocols which provide a nominated role for different participants as presenters, discussants, reviewers, etc., helps to foster the appropriate environment. Strict time management of oral contributions, combined with clear educator expectations as to content and format, is recognised by students. Early signposting of follow-on assignment tasks can help mitigate student boredom, particular for those playing a non-presenting role.

The built environment is relatively unimportant

The lack of 'appropriate' class room accommodation is often cited as a key factor inhibiting educator use of cases. Students, however, are far less concerned by the restrictions educators see in tiered rooms or rigid rows of forward-facing desks and chairs. Once the learning activities are viewed as interesting, valuable, and worthwhile, students are remarkably adept at organising themselves within the physical limitations of the teaching space. For some activities, however, it can be useful to consider finding large flat, lecture rooms; students are typically willing to re-organise as per the demands of the learning activities, particularly if the need to do so is signalled as part of the class protocols.

The 'dominant student' can be pivotal

Orchestrating 'constructive confrontation' is key to both small and larger group discussions of case analysis, particularly if the case chosen has multiple possible outcomes, rather than a single right answer. At the outset, the 'dominant student' can actually be a useful way of getting the discussion going. Creating opportunities for in-class synthesis of materials, via the combination of small group inputs into a 'decision' to be presented to the full class, makes it 'safer' for other students to 'take on' the dominant speaker, but from the perspective of a 'group' viewpoint. Educators can also ask other members of a dominant student group if they all agree or to expand upon some of the arguments already made; a key concern here being to ensure that students understand the difference between 'critique' and 'criticism'.

Conclusions

In summary, working with case studies offers students opportunities to engage with the world of business practice in a meaningful manner. Where classes have large numbers of students, greater consideration of the practical aspects of setting up and managing the learning activities is called for on the part of the educator. However, students are more than willing to harness the opportunities of novel approaches once educator expectations, as well as the learning objectives and potential learning outcomes, are clear to them and viewed to be of value. Once they know the 'rules of the game', even in large class settings, students can be willing and enthusiastic participants, responding to educator efforts in relation to planning and preparation. In a further article, the practical application of this approach to a specific case study will be described in greater detail.

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