

Five Keys to Writing an Excellent Case Study

By Josep Franch, Ph.D.

“We must do that!” When I hear a student or someone on an Executive Education course say this, I know the case discussion is going in the right direction and is likely to be a great learning experience for everyone.

For those of us who use case studies as our main learning methodology, what we try to do is bring a chunk of reality into the classroom as a way of developing our students’ analytical and decision-making skills. This requires students to: (1) crack and analyse a case; (2) identify a problem, a challenge or an opportunity; (3) develop alternatives to address the problem, challenge or opportunity; (4) evaluate the alternatives and make a decision, based on some criteria they need to draw up; (5) try to convince their classmates theirs is the right course of action (that “We must do that!” moment); (6) assess the implications and the consequences of their decisions; (7) identify the KPIs so that one can assess at some point in the future whether the right decision was taken and even whether it was the best one.

For this process to be successful, we need students to put themselves in the shoes of the case protagonists, hence the importance of “we” in the opening statement. What else is needed to turn a case study into an excellent learning tool? Based on my own experience I would highlight five main points:

First, a case needs to be a great story. It has to be intriguing, capture the reader’s interest and involve him or her in the plot. One might liken it to one of those ‘page-turners’ that one cannot put down until one has got to the end of the book. A good case has to be easy to read and has to present all the relevant information, data and facts, so the reader can easily grasp the situation. We often say that a case should be self-contained, which means that all the information needed to work on the case should be found within it. The case-writer needs to pay special attention to the case opening as it is what draws the reader in. Case structure and the way the information is presented are also important.

Second, a good case must have unique features. At the end of the day, decision-makers are individuals and different people facing the same business situation and challenges may well end up making different decisions. In addition, case-writers are supposed to present facts, they are not allowed to reveal their own views, which might introduce bias. This is where the case characters have a role to play: each one may have his or her own views, concerns and priorities. They may be more or less risk averse, or even have their own axes to grind. So a good case-writer has to spend some time developing these characters, who should be based on real people, situations and field work and not just be dreamt up.

Third, a case must have clear learning objectives. In addition to a powerful story, a good case needs these ‘Eureka’ or ‘Aha’ moments, which the case instructor typically reveals at the end of a case discussion, when the case ‘take-aways’ are shared with the participants. Based on my own experience, I find a case is easy to write when I know beforehand what I want students to take away with them when they leave the classroom. Once the learning objectives are clear to me, it becomes easier to develop the case outline and all the information neatly fits into the case study.

Fourth, case studies must be decision-focused. They should present a dilemma, a situation that needs to be addressed and requires a certain action. As I see it, 'descriptive cases' may be excellent research tools but they are useless for developing analytical and decision-making skills. After reading a case, there is nothing more discouraging for a student than to have that "So what?" feeling. Therefore cases have to be open, which is linked to the next point.

Fifth, a case should not have a clear, obvious answer. Who is interested in a thriller where you know who the murderer is after the first few pages? A good case has to surprise the learner, spark conflict and controversy in the classroom and make people defend their positions and try to convince others that they are right. After all, this is what happens in real life. Different people may have different views on the decision to be made. Good cases do not provide answers but rather help learners ask the right questions. This is a skill of inestimable value, as those who have read James Thurber's fable, '[The Scotty Who Knew Too Much](#)' will know.

If these five points are observed, one has the foundations on which to build an excellent case study. However, it is one thing to have solid foundations and it is quite another to raise a building. Any case-writer should keep in mind that a case study is a tool for experiential learning, which is often more powerful when students are involved and actively contribute to the case discussion. It is learning by doing and having to face real business situations. While the case instructor plays a role in this process, a well-written case is a must.

To finish, let me add that a good case must be accompanied by sound teaching notes or an instructor's manual. As a case instructor, I never use a case study unless it comes with a teaching note. The teaching note is what really provides the added value from an academic viewpoint, by giving recommendations to case instructors on the learning objectives, the target audience(s), the teaching approach, the questioning route, the expected answers and the links to other theories, models or frameworks. What works best for me is to develop the teaching note in parallel with the case study and then polishing it after using the case in class a few times. What are the keys to an excellent teaching note? That is the subject for another article.

Josep Franch is Associate Professor in Marketing and Dean at ESADE Business School (Barcelona, Catalonia). He is considered one of the main experts in case writing and teaching. He has published over 60 cases and has won the EFMD (European Foundation for Management Development) Case Writing Competition on three occasions and has also won two awards at the NACRA (North American Case Research Association) Annual Conferences.