

# The Role of Case Studies in Teaching Business Ethics: A Literature Review

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## **Abstract**

The literature review examines the role of case studies in teaching business ethics in Institutions of Higher Learning. Business ethics is an important discipline that involves making ethical decisions in the context of business organizations. Case studies provide a valuable tool for educators to engage students in critical thinking and ethical decision-making by applying theoretical concepts to real-world situations. This review explores the benefits, challenges, and best practices associated with using case studies in teaching business ethics, as well as the impact of case studies on student learning outcomes. The findings highlight the effectiveness of case studies in promoting active learning, fostering ethical awareness, and developing ethical decision-making capabilities in students.

## **1. Introduction:**

Over a hundred years ago when Harvard Business School initiated a case study method of teaching this was a novel approach (Herreid, 2011). Since then the analysis of real world cases has become a standard teaching method in business, law and medical schools (Herreid, 2011). For this work, a case study is defined to be a substantial problem based on a real-life example or designed to be similar to the types of problem that occur in real life. Such problems can be used as examples in lectures (or other teaching environments) or as problems that students work on either individually or in groups, and may or may not be assessed.

Business ethics is the application of ethical or core values to business behavior in all business activities (Ugoani, J. N. N., 2023). Business ethics as a subject started developing a hundred years back and was taken seriously as a subject as late as 1970s, which was only 50 years ago (Abend, 2013). The growth of the subject started in 1970s and 1980s and educationists started considering it discipline worthy of education, research, and publication. Following the rise of ethical scandals in the twenty-first century with Enron and WorldCom (Montage Portfolio, 2017) grabbing the newspaper headlines the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools in Business (AACSB) realized the significance of imparting education in ethics mainly to the students studying business management. A task force was established to examine and report on the current status of ethics education in business schools (Waples et al., 2009). The task force published a report that strongly advocated a course in business ethics that will help business management students cope with ethical dilemmas in their decision-making process.

Using cases in the teaching process gives the ability to understand different situations in different manners. For instance, cases are used as presentations, discussions, and debates etcetera. The instructor usually holds a seminar when they lecture with the help of cases. Case studies can be defined as “a description of a real or simulated managerial situation along with personal history of an individual,

institution, or business faced with a problem that must be solved” (Hoa, N. T., et al., 2021). Cases and the case methodology also give better understanding of the teaching (Helleve, I., et al., 2023). Teaching with cases can be either written, oral or in an audio-visual form, that are being analyzed by the instructor and the learners as they ultimately present a conclusion (Mardiyah, M., & Badriah, A. M., 2023). Such cases can also be explicit in terms of solving a problem in any common form, that way the participants get immediate feedback from each other and the instructor (Mardiyah, M., & Badriah, A. M., 2023).

## 2. Defining Business Ethics

Ugoani, J. N. N. (2023) has defined the concept of business ethics as a set of principles, norms, and standards, which is used to govern the conduct of an individual or a group of individuals engaged in business. Ethics lays down a specific rule of conduct and is known to provide limitation to behavior of an individual based on a prescribed set of guidelines (Bailey, J., & Burch, M. (2016). Ethical theories can be divided into two broad categories of study: normative, also known as prescriptive; and positive, also known as descriptive (Wang, S., et al., 2023). Normative theory as the name suggests is based on proposed a set of norms and ethical values (Ishmaev, G., 2021). Descriptive on the other hand, is based on psychology and takes into consideration the moral reasoning of behavior within a context (Smith, I. H., et al., 2023). As Smith, I. H., et al., (2023) have earlier stated that ethics is not about philosophy, it is about behavior of individuals and their moral responsibility.

There are several definitions of business ethics as prescribed by various academicians and nodal bodies. Ethics refers to standards of behavior of how human beings ought to act in various situations (Gershfeld Litvak, S., & Sush, D. J., 2023). In African context Woermann, M. (2018) states that, there has been existence and prevalence of business ethics in tradition, religion, and culture of Africans which was portrayed in respect for creation, elders, and norms of society. In that regard, people were expected to live a life of integrity when dealing with one another whether in business or any other area of human interaction. General ethical obligations were embedded in the African religious and cultural contexts (Gwagwa, A., et al., 2022).

## 3. Benefits of Case Studies in Teaching Business Ethics

The case study teaching method is a highly adaptable style of teaching that involves problem-based learning and promotes the development of analytical skills (Song, B. L., et al., 2022). By presenting content in the format of a narrative accompanied by questions and activities that promote group discussion and solving of complex problems, case studies facilitate development of the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy of cognitive learning; moving beyond recall of knowledge to analysis, evaluation, and application (Silalahi, S., et al., 2023). Similarly, case studies facilitate interdisciplinary learning and can be used to highlight connections between specific academic topics and real-world societal issues and applications (Bordin, C., et al., 2023). This has been reported to increase student motivation to participate in class activities, which promotes learning and increases performance on assessments (Gill, A., et al., 2023).

For these reasons, case-based teaching has been widely used in business for many years (Kusumaningrum, N. S. D., et al., 2023). Although case studies were considered a novel method of education just 20 years ago, the case study teaching method has also gained popularity in recent years among an array of scientific disciplines such as biology, chemistry, nursing, and psychology (Buenestado-Fernández, M., et al., 2023). Although there is now a substantive and growing body of

literature describing how to develop and use case studies in teaching, current research on the effectiveness of case study teaching at meeting specific learning objectives is of limited scope and depth. Studies have shown that working in groups during completion of case studies significantly improves student perceptions of learning and may increase performance on assessment questions, and can increase student engagement in case study activities (Bonney, K. M., 2015). For example Case study teaching has been shown to improve exam performance in an anatomy and physiology course, increasing the mean score across all exams given in a two-semester sequence from 66% to 73% (Cliff W. H., & Wright A. W. (1996).

Use of case studies was also shown to improve students' ability to synthesize complex analytical questions about the real-world issues associated with a topic (Bonney, K. M., 2015). In a high school courses, it was demonstrated that the case study teaching method produces significant increases in self-reported control of learning, task value, and self-efficacy for learning and performance (Perry, D. R., & Steck, A. K., 2015). This effect on student motivation is important because enhanced motivation for learning activities has been shown to promote student engagement and academic performance (Al Yakin, A., & Seraj, P. M. I., 2023). Additionally, faculties from a number of institutions have reported that using case studies promotes critical thinking, learning, and participation among students, especially in terms of the ability to view an issue from multiple perspectives and to grasp the practical application of core course concepts (Yadav, A., et al., 2007).

#### **4. Challenges of Using Case Studies in Teaching Business Ethics**

##### **4.1 Pedagogical Challenges**

###### **4.1.1 Unfamiliarity with case teaching**

For many students, discussing and analyzing a case is an unfamiliar experience. Students are often socialized into the standard college-lecture large group format where the instructor lectures, students take notes, and interaction between instructor and student is otherwise confined to question and answer events. In the traditional format, preparation for these types of classes usually consists of preparing the material for an upcoming class by understanding and being familiar with the subject content. Analysis of the content, if any, tends toward the superficial and aspects of analysis which are directly and obviously tied to the content.

###### **4.1.2 Relating cases to a theoretical base**

Even if students are able to respond to case dilemmas with insight and articulated argument, they may still find it difficult to relate their opinions to the theoretical content of the course. The notoriety of the research-to-practice gap might be at its most acute in the case setting for a number of reasons. For example, undergraduates might not have the theoretical or even practical experiential background to be able to relate case problems and solutions to relevant knowledge and theory bases. Among graduates, especially practitioners, there is often a bias against applying theory or empirical research to any classroom problem except in rudimentary and often unresponsive ways. For many others, the problem lies in evaluating and selecting relevant theories from among those they have learned. Further, some students may tend to view the practical nature of the cases as separate from the theoretical bases of the course.

#### **4.1.3 Case preparation**

Preparing cases for instruction is a labor intensive activity which constantly evolves depending on the purpose for which the case is used and the course content to which it is linked. Rarely can instructors hope to use the same preparation from one use of the case to the next across different course and teaching objectives. In addition, repeated use of most cases either for the same or different teaching objectives will lead to greater and more fine-grained insights which change the nature of the approach to teaching the case over time. Generally, properly preparing a teaching case involves much more time than an elementary review of course content, the most likely preparation used by course instructors who are qualified to teach the content of their syllabi. Preparation for students can also be time consuming. Preferably, students should read the case ahead of time and prepare notes that document their insights based on reflection, connections to the course content, and their own experiences. Some students may therefore find preparing cases quite difficult if they have not had previous experience with case method teaching and its approaches to problem solving and analysis.

#### **4.1.4 Case emphases**

Novice case instructors often encounter difficulty in deciding what to emphasize when teaching the case. Especially seductive is the tendency to spend too much class time recounting the actual events or situations of the case at the expense of discussion eliciting insight to given dilemmas and for generating solutions. Given that most cases can be adapted to any number of important and relevant insights related to course objectives, instructors must select which analytical aspects will best serve their purposes. Clearly, this implies that the case instructor is skilled at evaluating the nuances of the case and in selecting appropriate emphases and how best to present them.

#### **4.1.5 Speculation**

A primary characteristic of case-based instruction involves the levels of interpretive complexity which quickly arise and multiply during case analysis. A common problem related to this complexity is what might be reasonably extrapolated versus almost endless speculation about what “might have been.” This challenge may be alleviated by the use of carefully written cases and clear teaching objectives. This solution notwithstanding, many novice instructors and students are tempted to expand case discussion and analysis beyond the details and facts presented in the case, leading to unnecessary distraction and derailing of the teaching objectives of the case.

#### **4.1.6 Case complexity**

Case complexity varies from case to case. However, most cases embody several layers of meaning beneficial to students as they apply the case to the course content or their educational knowledge base. Such complexity, while providing obvious advantages, can also be a drawback. For example, deeper levels of complexity are not immediately obvious and may take an inordinate amount of time to uncover; students who lack classroom experience may be unable to recognize the finer issues presented in the case, and without adequate preparation and reflection, deeper case issues might remain hidden. Generally, preservice teachers, absent knowledge of the real world of teaching, often become confused or distracted by this case characteristic. Such confusion can potentially derail even the best case teaching and also increases the possibility that students will see case analysis as aversive. One way of avoiding

this problem is for the case leader to maintain a focus on a single or a very few fairly obvious case issues.

#### **4.1.7 Strategies for introducing cases**

Student interest and willingness to engage in energetic case discussions can be significantly affected by how the case is introduced. Traditional introductions, role playing, surprises, the use of videotape or audiotape, etc., all have potential benefits and drawbacks. How effectively cases are introduced will depend, for example, on the case experience and motivation of the students and the instructor, a careful assessment of each set of class response characteristics, and a close match between the course and case content and how it is introduced.

#### **4.1.8 Teaching style of the case leader**

Teaching cases seems to be closely linked to the teaching style of the case leader. The interactive nature required in discussing cases necessitates a level of energy and concentration which may not be necessary for other forms of instruction. Effective case instructors must be articulate, somewhat entertaining, energetic, and able to guide discussion but not dominate it, shape the case discussion toward connecting with the course objectives, and so on. Obviously, for many instructors, these and other demands might not be a good match for their teaching personalities, pedagogical preferences, or willingness to explore case-based instruction.

#### **4.1.9 Participation in case discussion**

Case-based teaching is based, in part, on vigorous discussion and debate of the case issues and the array of potential solutions. Ideally, every student participates in these discussions, skillfully guided by the instructor. However, it is rare that all students in a case discussion will be eager to participate and state their views without hesitation. This is especially problematic in undergraduate case instruction where many students seem to defer to the instructor. For example, there may be several students who, for a variety of reasons, appear reluctant to participate. Some of these students may participate after a few sessions of listening to their peers or when encouraged to do so by the case instructor. However, case instructors often encounter a few students who, despite their best efforts, remain silent or participate at minimal levels. Minimal or nonparticipation is most problematic because it prevents fellow students and the instructor from benefiting from these students' insights and from evaluating their progress towards insight into the case problems and solutions.

#### **4.1.10 Questioning techniques**

Some case instructors seem to have difficulty asking questions that will elicit responses to fuel the momentum of case discussion. Questions which elicit "yes/no" responses or do not challenge students to explain their views and insights will not provide sufficient stimulus for other participants and can quickly lead to "discussion inertia." It is important that instructors (and students) phrase questions which are likely to elicit responses defending or critiquing previous comments or observations.

#### **4.1.11 Focused case discussion**

Given the complexity of most cases and the diverse views likely to be held by the participants, keeping the discussion focused according to the objectives of the course and the course content can be difficult.

For example, extraneous comments, distracting side-issues, and a lack of preparation related to the content of the case can all be detrimental. Even more positive asides, such as unanticipated, unique but interesting issues that arise, might tempt the instructor to change the course of the discussion. While this may prove useful in some instances, it can often mean that the original intent and teaching objectives of the case may be lost.

#### **4.1.12 Directive teaching**

Given that most students are typically socialized to seeing course instructors as holders and imparters of content knowledge and truth, they are often nonplussed when asked for their perceptions, judgments, or opinions. If students are indeed novice case analysts, it may be more practical to be more directive and less subtle than when teaching cases to graduate students or experienced teachers. As students become more comfortable with their own abilities in analyzing cases, course instructors can resume a more facilitative role.

### **4.2 Practical Challenges**

#### **4.2.1 Class size**

Case method teaching works best with small groups of students. A class of 12-15 people seems to provide enough diverse opinions and opportunities for active participation in case discussion. Given the enrollment patterns of most undergraduate courses, however, these numbers are idealistic. Commonly, undergraduate education classes contain many more. As the number of students increases, the less likely it will be that everyone will have an equal opportunity to participate. Also, the greater the class size, the more likely it will be that other distracters will multiply. While case teaching can be adversely affected by a great number of students in a class, it can also be affected by too few students. For example, in a graduate class with only three or four students, the critical mass of diverse opinions, insights, and perceptions might not be reached, especially if one or more of the students tend to be unreflective, unresponsive, or both.

#### **4.2.2 Time**

The analytical levels within cases take time to uncover. How long this is likely to take depends of the complexity of the individual case, students' willingness to engage in focused discussion, time allocated for the discussion, and the skill of the case leader. As the complexity of a case emerges, novice instructors often run out of time to achieve their teaching objectives. Limiting the depth of case analysis according to both teaching objectives and time constraints is therefore important.

#### **4.2.3 Problems in written expression**

Initially, students find writing responses to cases difficult. In spite of explicit instructions that they are to respond to the cases out of their personal and professional knowledge (which may or may not have been modified by class discussion), students are often confused as to what they are expected to do. They seem to be accustomed to providing written responses which are strictly factual or at least discoverable from their textbook and course content. No only do students encounter technical difficulties, but also in how to articulate their reflective observations and how these are connected to course content and teaching objectives.

#### **4.2.4 Physical setting for the discussion**

The physical setting in which the case discussion takes place can add to or detract from the case analysis in that case discussions tend to be intense and often generate high levels of emotion. The setting becomes pivotal when case discussions occur over extended periods of time. Ideally, a seated circle or horseshoe allows improved eye contact and positioning for effective verbal and nonverbal communication. Also, movable chairs allow for team discussions in large groups. It may be important for each student to have a writing surface available rather than an open seat. Lighting and ventilation are also important. The physical setting is also important to allow mobility of the case leader.

#### **4.2.5 Students' names**

Knowing the names of students is important because it facilitates communication and encourages cross-talk and direct communication with other members of the class. Name cards or photos matched to the students' names can help instructors alleviate any impersonal aspects of case discussion. However, in teaching large classes it is often difficult to learn all the students' names by the end of the course, let alone in time to conduct a case discussion.

#### **4.2.6 Inexperience**

Case analysis, because it relies heavily on personal, practical, professional, and content knowledge, assumes that students bring to the analysis a wealth of experience that will allow them to extract optimum instruction from the professional issues cases present. Again, undergraduate preservice teachers are less likely to possess high levels of professional experience that will allow them to engage in deeper analysis. Case instructors should carefully gauge the knowledge needed for analyzing any particular case and match it to the students, or teach necessary content ahead of time.

#### **4.2.7 Modeling**

Because case-based teaching, at least initially, is so foreign to many students, it is important that the instructor be highly skilled in modeling case discussion and interpersonal communication skills. However, as noted earlier, not every instructor possess or is willing to learn these key attributes, which, in turn, may lead to poor case teaching.

#### **4.2.8 Explicit teaching of access to resources**

A common problem once students understand the rudiments of case analysis, they often have difficulty matching case problems to course content, often because they lack classroom experience in their own discipline and related, but important disciplines. Even if they are able to do so, they often have difficulty accessing various information sources other than the course text. Instructors should explicitly teach and model where such resource information may be found. Such a lack of knowledge constrains the choice of cases, issues within cases, and levels of case complexity. Generally, experienced practitioners tend to be more astute at bridging complex case situations and overarching educational theory than their inexperienced or novice counterparts.

### **5. Best Practices in Using Case Studies for Teaching Business Ethics**

The case study method of teaching used in management education is quite different from most of the methods of teaching used at the school and undergraduate course levels. Unlike traditional lecture-based

teaching where student participation in the classroom is minimal, the case method is an active learning method, which requires participation and involvement from the student in the classroom. For students who have been exposed only to the traditional teaching methods, this calls for a major change in their approach to learning.

### **5.1 Preparing and Structuring the Case Study**

Designing case studies to facilitate and assess student learning involves more than just writing a story. According to Grimes, M. W. (2019), case studies relevant to course content can be found or adapted from other sources or created from scratch. As with any course activity, it is important for case studies to meet the established learning outcomes of the course. In designing a continuous case study, instructors can purposefully select the most appropriate course content to include. Additionally, instructors can more easily incorporate continuous case studies as a formative assessment of learning that follows the natural flow of the course. By scaffolding the course content over time (as opposed to a singular, summative case study), instructors can more accurately provide students with specific, attainable learning goals that align with the broader collection of course learning outcomes. Nilson (2010) described four, must-have components of good case design. First, a case must be realistic. Students will be able to better identify with case content that has lifelike characters, historical context, and details relevant to their lives. Next, a case should prompt students to draw on prior knowledge, preferably using course content familiar to them. Then, a case needs enough ambiguity for students to create their own unique problem-solving processes and solutions. Without a unique process or result, students are less likely to remain attentive and engaged in the task. Finally, a case must rouse a sense of urgency in students. Although students will know that the case is merely illustrative of something real, stimulating their responses to time-sensitive and/or serious solutions is more likely to capture their attention.

### **5.2 Facilitating Student engagement**

Unlike lecture-based teaching, the case method requires intensive preparation by the students, before each class (Minkos, M. L., & Gelbar, N. W., 2021). If a case has been assigned for discussion in the class, the student must prepare carefully and thoroughly for the case discussion. The first step in this preparation is to read the case thoroughly. To grasp the situation described in a case study, the student will need to read it several times. The first reading of the case can be a light one, to get a broad idea of the story. The subsequent readings must be more focused, to help the student become familiar with the facts of the case, and the issues that are important in the situation being described in the case – the who, what, where, why and how of the case. However, familiarity with the facts described in the case is not enough. The student must also acquire a thorough understanding of the case situation, through a detailed analysis of the case. During the case analysis process, she must attempt to identify the main protagonists in the case study (organizations, groups, or individuals described in the case) and their relationships.

The student must also keep in mind that different kinds of information are presented in the case study. There are facts, which are verifiable from several sources. There are inferences, which represent an individual's judgment in a given situation. There is speculation, which is information which cannot be verified. There are also assumptions, which cannot be verified, and are generated during case analysis or discussion. Clearly, all these different types of information are not equally valuable for managerial decision-making. Usually, the greater your reliance on facts (rather than speculation or



assumptions), the better the logic and persuasiveness of your arguments and the quality of your decisions.

## 6. Impact of Case Studies on Student Learning Outcomes

The case study method is a collaborative problem solving method that involves critical analysis process using various techniques, materials, and tools for problems or cases concerning symptoms or problems (Yadav, A., et al., 2007). This method teaches students an alternative concept of understanding based on cases. The method involves cases that are found in everyday life so that it encourages students to discuss their ideas (Kilis, S., & Yildirim, Z., 2019). The application of this method encourages students to learn and understand concepts, integrates cases with knowledge concepts, and encourages students to develop professional skills, such as collaboration and communication (Miranda, J., et al., 2021). The case study method implemented in discussion activities can develop students' ability to test their ideas and understanding so that it can facilitate the learning process and improve learning outcomes (Zhang, X., et al., 2023). Case-based learning also helps students integrate and apply the knowledge, skills, and assessments needed in solving problems or cases (Lavi, R., & Marti, D., 2023). Based on the description above, it is important to investigate the effectiveness of the case study-based chemistry learning textbook in learning. Therefore, this study aimed to describe the effectiveness of the case study-based chemistry learning textbook in improving students' learning outcomes.

## 7. Empirical evidence

In 1870 the Harvard Law School began teaching with cases of Dean Christopher Columbus as their guide (Ábrahám, Z., 2023). Cases were individually analyzed and discussed by students and by 1915, the case methodology arose in many law schools which made the case methodology in legal law education, later on it spread to medicine and business as well (Merseeth, 1996). Merseeth (1996) explained that cases affect teaching in a manner that gives the learners an opportunity to solve problems and to educate them in analyzing skills. It may also teach them how to make decisions in the classroom. Students learn the best when they go through with problems. Hence, they learn to focus on both theoretical parts and practical parts which can be crucial for their understanding (Vople, 2015). Merseeth (1996) argues that the main reason of cases is the self-analysis and personal reflection, even though some use cases to transform theory to practice. Teaching with cases is being proposed as a professional field, for instance in business, those who have had previous experience will be better affected by the case methodology (Merseeth, 1996). To exemplify this; the student get a subject about eating-disorders where they get a case which involves solving a problem in teams, design an evidence-based campaign, being ethical but also involve multiple concerns (Austin & Sonnevile, 2013). Their assignment is to identify the bias and make research, but also decision-making, to evident the collected information (Austin & Sonnevile, 2013). Merseeth (1996) states that when cases are used in teaching the first approach is to review important data and answer study questions given by the instructor. Continuously, the work process can either be made individually or in smaller groups to share insights and opinions. Then they meet at the seminar with every class member, to discuss the case subject. At the seminar, the leader guides and gives direct feedback, but also observes the interactions between the students (Merseeth, 1996). Cases engage the apprentice in a manner where they apply theory to practice (Puni, A., &Febrer, Y., 2023).

## 9. Conclusion:

By synthesizing the existing literature on the role of case studies in teaching business ethics, this review provides valuable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and researchers. The findings highlight the effectiveness of case studies in promoting ethical decision-making and preparing future business professionals to navigate complex ethical dilemmas. Cases are advantageous in manners such as to improve analysis skills with the help of using one's senses. An additional advantage is the doctrine of decision-making and being able to solve problems. Other beneficial factors are the process to be able to implement theory to practice and the knowledge that arises through this. Consequently it involves participant's senses, which in turn makes it easier to analyze through cases. Another advantage of using case studies in teaching is that it generates into discussions which are mostly started with a seminar. This in turn leads to yet more knowledge as the participants learn from each other. Furthermore, using cases in teaching also increases critical thinking, which is advantageous in an investigation process where participants will come to a conclusion. By putting all the benefits together when teaching with case studies leads to a more educative process. This literature review underscores the need for continued research and professional development to optimize the use of case studies as a pedagogical tool in business ethics education.

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