

Online Discussion Enabled Mode for Case Instruction

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Abstract

Advances in e-learning systems software have spawned a multi-billion dollar industry dedicated to the development of virtual classrooms, distance education, and online support for in-class instruction. Versatility in the use of such systems and tools by both instructors and students are engendering augmented instructional modes that blend the use of Internet-based tools and traditional instructional methods. The current paper illustrates the melding of online discussion forums with the most popular of business education teaching tools, the case methodology in an international marketing course.

Introduction: The Growth of E-Learning

In his visionary book, *The Third Wave*, Alvin Toffler predicted the revolutionary impact of advances in information technology on almost all spheres of human activity (Toffler, 1981). The developments in information technology and telecommunications during the past two decades have fulfilled and continue to support Toffler's vision. In his later book, *The Power-shift*, Alvin Toffler further suggest that the "information age" is evolving into the "knowledge age" (Toffler, 1991) In the modern age, knowledge is the key factor in production and the role of the instructor is to teach people how to think (Dreifus, 1997).

In an age when knowledge is the key factor in production, institutions of higher learning are expected to play a pre-eminent role. As if in fulfillment of Toffler's vision, universities have been adopting various technology-enabled instructional methods to facilitate "e-learning". e-learning provides a learning experience to an audience via the Internet and multimedia presentation (Lau, 2000). Numerous "virtual universities" have sprung up around the globe in response to the needs of the times. An article by Elisabeth Goodridge (2001) quotes research from the International Data Corporation, which shows that the e-learning market in the United States will grow from \$2.3 billion in 2000 to \$14.7 billion by 2004 and to \$18.5 billion by 2005. Worldwide, the overall e-learning market is expected to hit \$23 billion by 2004.

This growth of "virtual classrooms" has raised many questions about their effectiveness in meeting instructional goals. Many critics through anecdotal and empirical evidence suggest that "brick" is preferable to "click" (Dyrud, 2000). They contend that traditional modes of instruction are more effective. A study by the University of Illinois (1999) concluded that "... the ongoing physical and even emotional interaction between teacher and students, and among students themselves, was an integral part of a university education". The above report implied that poor interaction was a fundamental weakness of virtual university education.

Collaborative Learning in Business Education

Business education is often very heavily dependent on collaborative learning methods. Collaborative or group learning involves interpersonal processes by which a small group of students works together cooperatively to complete a problem-solving task designed to promote learning (Alavi, 1994). The collaborative learning concept is based on the three premises of effective learning: active, cooperative, and group problem solving. Several studies have demonstrated the superiority of collaborative learning over traditional modes of learning (Bell, 1998). A particularly important reason for the use of collaborative learning in business education is the recognition that teams are common in industry (Thomchick, 1997). Thus, collaborative learning adds realism to business education.

Due to the role of technology in the contemporary business world, it is particularly important for business students to be comfortable with modern technology. Business students and faculty are typically comfortable with the Web. Recent research findings suggest that graduate business teachers and programs should cultivate their skills in facilitating and generating student interaction along with developing the technological skills necessary to teach Internet-based business courses (Arbaugh, 2000). This suggestion is perhaps most relevant to business instruction using collaborative methods of instruction.

The Case Method of Instruction in Business

The case method of instruction is meant to add a certain degree of realism to business education. In business education, a case is a description of an actual situation, commonly involving a decision, a challenge, an opportunity, a problem or an issue faced by a person (or persons) in an organization (Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, & Leenders, 1997). A business case study is a description of a management situation or, perhaps, a "management story" (Bonoma & Kosnik, 1990).

There is no single all-encompassing formula for instruction using the case method. The typical process for in-class case discussion consists of four steps ordered as follows (Quelch & Dolan, 1993):

1. individual analysis and preparation
2. optional informal small group discussion
3. classroom discussion
4. end-of-class generalization about the learning

Sometimes cases are analyzed in examinations or analyzed and submitted as written assignments. Even in such instances, very often the written analysis and submission are preceded or followed by small group- or classroom- discussion. Instructors also often require the formal oral presentation of a case in front of a class or the formal critique of another's case presentation. Other variations include role playing, visitors to class, team teaching (with multiple instructors in the same class), interactive video conferencing, and field trips

(Erskine, Leenders, & Mauffette-Leenders, 1998). Although cases may be used in a variety of ways, it is notable that most modes of case instruction involve some form of discussion and interaction among students and between students and the instructor.

The case method of instruction makes it possible for a participant to vicariously step into the shoes of the decision maker. It is among the most widely used forms of experiential learning and collaborative learning in marketing education. This method of instruction can be used to develop, sharpen, and test a variety of analytical skills (Cravens, Lamb, & Crittenden, 1999). Moreover, it can be used to provide exposure to a broad range of situations facing different types of organizations in a variety of industries and in a variety of environments. The case method of instruction is particularly well suited to deal with new and complex situations (Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, & Leenders, 1997). Due to the high degree of complexity and uncertainty faced by decision makers in the international marketing environment, the case method is a critical instructional tool in international marketing courses.

If marketing education is to make full use of the capabilities of modern information technology while retaining the strengths of the case method of instruction, it is important that educators find a way to integrate and blend the two through the development of innovative instructional systems. Instead of being constrained by the weakness of inadequate human interaction, such instructional systems should seek to generate synergy between the two. The carefully designed instructional system presented in this paper supports the contention of the authors that modern instructional technology is capable of synergistic integration of on-line instruction and the case method.

The Purpose of the Current Project

As mentioned earlier, like all other endeavors, higher education and especially training have from antiquity been quick to capitalize on the availability of technology. The latest example of this is the explosion in the development of e-learning systems with the advent and exploitation of the Internet (and intranet) both for research and commercial pursuits. The greatest component of this development is in the training

arena, with the objective for systems being geared toward the “concept of delivering ‘just in time’ on-line knowledge and training at the desktop...to employees so that they will have the internal tools to make their work smarter and therefore more productive” (Moore & Jones, 2001). An analog in the traditional higher educational market is the use of e-learning systems to deliver distance education and on-line support for traditional in-class instruction. A pioneer and a leader in this field is WebCt which prides itself as the world’s leading provider of e-learning solutions for higher education. WebCt began with an educator’s dream for his students: a flexible, integrated environment where he could use the latest technology to foster inquiry, encourage discourse and inspire collaboration. Today, their mission is to help institutions deliver on their commitment to educational excellence with enterprise-wide learning management solutions which integrate the richest and most flexible pedagogical tools (epacks, course content presentation, syllabi, email, discussion forums, chat-rooms, whiteboards and student presentation areas) with existing campus infrastructure. WebCt is the preferred partner of more than 2,200 institutions in 77 countries around the world, making it the *de facto* standard in higher education. WebCt is available in 10 major world languages. (WebCt website).

According to Susan Guest, the former vice president of Learning and Development at American General, Inc., the biggest challenge facing the e-learning industry is the mindset that says “learning is done best in a classroom with the teacher standing in front of the students” (Goodridge, 2001). Therefore, the long-term success and full “potential realization” of e-

learning systems require that they supplement the traditional classroom in addition to being used for “pure distance programs or as a stand-alone teaching and learning environment, appropriate for limited deployment.” (WebCt terminology from WebCt site). Supplementing traditional classroom instruction may involve retrofitting traditional methods with features that would capitalize on tools that technology makes possible.

The current presentation deals with one such innovation in one of the most ubiquitous classroom instruction formats in business management education: the case method of instruction. The case-method also finds extensive usage in the international aspects of business management education, and it is in this environment that we demonstrate the value of melding e-learning tools to the case methodology.

In its typical application, the case method of instruction culminates in a “case discussion” where the instructor and/or the rest of the class critique a student or a student group’s analysis, recommendations, and presentation of a case on an assigned date. The critique usually is a static reaction to what is being presented. By combining a “discussion” using the forum tool within an integrated e-learning system to accompany “the presentation,” the critiquing environment becomes a dynamic one, thereby enhancing the traditional method of instruction. A discussion forum tool is a communication and collaboration tool that allows for asynchronous (not simultaneous) “discussions.” It allows the creation of topic areas (“threads”) for discussion. Topics can be public or private. Messages posted to public discussions can be read and replied to by anyone having access to the course.

EXHIBIT I: WebCt Discussion Board Page Identifying Threads

Select a topic to see its messages

Compose Discussion Message	Search
Manage Messages	Topic Settings
	Manage Topics

Topic	Unread	Total	Status
All	616	764	
Main	6	8	Public, unlocked
Notes	0	0	public, unlocked
Anheuser-Busch international, inc.: Mexico and Brazil	61	83	public, unlocked
AOL Goes Far East and Brazil	15	55	public, unlocked
Group 1	4	6	private, unlocked
Group 2	1	7	private, unlocked
Group 3	2	2	private, unlocked
Group 4	0	2	private, unlocked
Group 5	0	0	private, unlocked
Group 6	1	1	private, unlocked
Group 7	0	0	private, unlocked
Group 8	0	0	private, unlocked
Group 9	0	0	private, unlocked
Heineken NV	58	78	public, unlocked
Hoechst Marion Roussel	45	51	public, unlocked
Mid Term Essay Questions	18	22	public, unlocked
Mid Term Multiple Choice Questions	39	46	public, unlocked
Mid Term Short Answer Questions	29	46	public, unlocked
Odysseus. inc.	58	73	public, unlocked
Pepsi One	62	62	public, unlocked
Pharma Swede	66	66	public, unlocked
Terrorism Case	134	137	public, unlocked
Toys R Us Goes to Japan	0	1	public, unlocked
Which Company is Transitional	17	31	public, unlocked

Private topics are only available more selectively. By dedicating a thread to a particular case within the discussion tool, an instructor creates an online analog to an in-class case discussion instruction format. Any message board software, not necessarily integrated e-learning systems, would suffice for this activity. In fact, over the years, one of the co-authors has used VAX Notes, group decision systems soft-

ware PLEXSYS, an in-house system called ICE, Cold Fusion Forums software, and Microsoft Activeforum software for this activity prior to using the discussion tool within WebCt. The use of online discussion in aiding case analyses is illustrated through its use in a graduate international marketing class. A similar exercise was also undertaken in the undergraduate international marketing course.

Course Details

The course, International Marketing, was presented in a multi-faceted learning format involving: traditional closed book, closed notes examinations (a mid-term and a final exam) involving multiple-choice, short answer and essay questions, (35 percent of the final grade); case analysis assignments including both lead and critiquing roles (25 percent); contemporary state-of-the literature review and appreciation (20 percent); and a focused global strategic and marketing plan project (20 percent). Although e-learning was assimilated in each of these broad learning thrusts, the current presentation only details its use in the case analysis segment.

Class Mechanics

The class of 36 students was organized into nine groups of four students each. Each group was assigned to lead or critique one of eight cases assigned during the term. Because of the asymmetry, one case was simultaneously led by two groups and another case was critiqued by two groups in order to afford each group lead and critique roles. Lead and critique groups and the in-class discussion date for each case were firmed up during the first week of class. Also established at this time was a discussion forum, or thread, for each case. As soon as these details were taken care of, the cases were deemed open for discussion, or “live.” (See Exhibits I and III.) Assignment of lead and critique groups did not preclude the rest of the class from participating in the discussions. In fact, student groups were evaluated for their performance on “lead case,” “critique case,” and “other cases.” Each thread was

open for discussion throughout the term. The ability to be (as WebCt claims) “always on” is one of the principal benefits of adding an online component to traditional case delivery. A case was temporarily closed for discussion between 10:00 p.m. of the night before the in-class discussion and the morning following it. This restriction was needed so that students could achieve closure on a case immediately prior to its discussion in class.

Chronology of Case Instruction in an Online Discussion Enabled Mode

Once a case became live, the lead group was expected to initiate the case discussion by briefly introducing the case and highlighting the major issues and likely solutions (that is, a typical case analysis). (From the timeline in Exhibit II it is clear that the emotional aspects of the case revolving around the September 11 incidents made a few of the students “jump the gun.”) This was followed by the critique group as well as the rest of the class joining in the debate. New ideas were introduced by composing a message or a “sub-thread,” while issues were joined by replying to others comments (Composing a message and replying to a composed message are the two functions in a discussion forum.) Once the lead group initiated a discussion, anyone in class could either develop a new line of thought or respond to issues raised by others. On the scheduled in-class discussion day, both lead and critique groups digest the ongoing discussions and their own points of view, and make formal presentations in class which are followed by a general class discussion (See Exhibit III).

Exhibit II: Examples of Lead Group Initiation & Message Posting and Reply Features



Subject Terrorism just like business

[Previous Thread](#) [Next Thread](#) [Close](#)

[Reply](#) [Reply Privately](#) [Quote](#) [Download](#)

Message no. 549 Posted by Steve Turgut 2 2 (saturgut) on Tue Nov 20, 2001 06:59

It is amazing (and scary at the same time) to see how bin Laden is running his terror network just like a business. Out of both articles one can see that he uses such business practices as franchising, mergers, and centralized training. The CEO is in command of a global organization (franchise type) that is very dedicated, locally operated, and that does not seem to waste any time and money.

By looking at the US or the rest of the world as its competitors, we could probably state that we underestimated bin Laden's firm. In sports as well as in business one should never underestimate the competitors one is up against.

[Previous Thread](#) [Next Thread](#) [Close](#)

Subject Re: Terrorism just like business

[Reply](#) [Reply Privately](#) [Quote](#) [Download](#)

Message no. 550 Branch from no. [549](#) Posted by Jack Kroger 1 1 (jkkroger) on Wed Nov 21, 2001 12:30

And not to mention the fact that, unlike MNC's, bin-Laden's employees are willing to die for their cause.

[Previous Message](#) [Next Message](#)

[Previous Thread](#) [Next Thread](#) [Close](#)

EXHIBIT III: Course Mechanics and Chronology

1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation of Groups • Assignment of a Lead and Critique Case For Eaxh Group • Scheduling a Date (Week) for In-class Presentation for each of the Eight Cases discussed during the term • Making each of the Eight Cases 'Live'
2	
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Class Discussion: Case 1
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Class Discussion: Case 2
5	
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Class Discussion: Case 3
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Class Discussion: Case 4
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Class Discussion: Case 5
9	
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Class Discussion: Case 6
11	
12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Class Discussion: Case 7
13	
14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Class Discussion: Case 8

Note: All Eight Cases Remain Live Until This Week

Exhibit II shows the initiation of the online discussion with a lead group member presenting the strengths in a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. The discussion forum accommodates various forms of attachments. In this case, the strengths were presented in an MS Word document. The exhibit also depicts the initiation of a new “thread” by a student not belonging to either the lead or the critique group and a reply to this message from another student, similarly not belonging to either of the groups. Students were identified by their group numbers and their numbers within their groups (e.g., G1 N1 means the student whose number was 1 within group 1). When case assignments are group oriented, it is more important that message postings reflect group identification rather than individual identification. The current version of WebCt does not automatically track group identification, hence we had to arrive at a creative way to automatically reflect group membership in message postings (See Exhibit II). It would have been inconsiderate and fruitless to expect students to remember and identify their group membership each time they posted a message.

Benefits of Incorporating an On-Line Forum to a Traditional Case Presentation

Several benefits derive from linking an online discussion to traditional case presentations.

1. There is more involvement in the case analysis from all concerned. The lead and critique groups have their ideas whetted before their formal presentations. Greater involvement leads to greater satisfaction and a fuller discussion of the issues in a case.
2. Since case presentations have necessarily to be staggered throughout the term, some inequity occurs in that the ones who have to present earlier are at a disadvantage. In the current format, all cases are open throughout the term. A case discussion continues even if its “in-class presentation” is completed. There are two benefits here. Each discussion is “open” and message posts can be added at any time during the term, providing “a level playing field” to each case

analysis. Case discussions are also enriched by concepts that are introduced in the class after a case has been discussed in class. This is especially important in cases where there is a call for the application of specialized global marketing mix strategies (examples like global, regional, or national branding, umbrella brands, and sprinkler or waterfall strategies), a topic that is only covered by the instructor toward the last half or third of the class. Students have the opportunity to revisit any case discussion at any point in the term enriching the discussion with newly learned concepts, ideas, theories, and tools.

3. As students get used to the concept of online discussions, the discussions become more elaborate and issues are sharply debated. Exhibit I shows that the number of postings for the various cases ranged from 51 to 137 (51, 55, 62, 66, 73, 78, 88, 137). Typically one or two of the group-members poll their groups and post messages on behalf of the group. This was the mode selected by the class to avoid duplicate postings and to present group consensus. A group member with a dissenting view could add additional posts. The number of postings would have been significantly higher if individuals posted on their own. The case with the highest posting, which incidentally was also the last case of the term, was a home-grown case inspired by the September 11 tragedy. The home-grown case arose from articles in the New York Times and the local metropolitan area daily which suggested that the al-Qaeda organization (or more generally, global terrorism) was more evolved than most so-called global and transnational corporations. The objective of the case analysis was to understand the “organization” and develop effective strategies to deal (“battle”) with it. The result, in terms of the significantly higher number of postings, is not surprising. In general, there did not appear to be a significant correlation between the number of postings and the timing of the presentation (earlier or later in the term).

4. As mentioned earlier, case analysis fosters collaborative learning. In the traditional method of case instruction, collaborative learning occurs in the interaction of small group of three to five individuals. Enhancing traditional case instruction with online discussions, collaborative learning is engendered within individual groups, and among several such small groups. In sociological terms, individual, village, clan, and community learning are thus engendered.
5. One of the most useful features in online discussions, especially in a course like International Marketing, is that one can direct the attention of others to important information on the Internet by sharing the sites URL (Uniform Resource Locator). This is very useful especially when one is dealing with foreign cultures that most of us are unfamiliar with. A group making an in-class presentation can direct its audiences attention to such Websites, but only at the time of presentation and may be limited by time to share all of the "research." Again, online forums provide an avenue for others in the class to direct the attention of the investigating groups to resources that these groups may not have considered or been aware of. Exhibit IV shows examples of both the lead group and an "other" group directing the attention of the class to such resources.
6. Since the instructor is privy to all the discussions taking place in the forum, he or she may gently lead the discussions to desired goals. The instructor may also monitor the discussions, and focus a critique on elements not already considered. One of the more observable outcomes of the blending process is the effective use of class-time during the in-class discussion.

Limitations with Online Discussions

The instructor and students need to be aware of some of the difficulties in using on-line forums to supplement traditional case format. In a traditional case analysis, the case analysis and presentation are an integrated whole even though it sub-divided into broad

categories such as situational analysis, assessment of opportunities and threats, specification of marketing objectives, formulation of marketing strategies, preparation of action programs and budgets, and development of control procedures (Czinkota, 2000). In on-line discussions, message posts have to be parsed even more finely with one sub-thread representing at most one or two discrete ideas. This is necessary to facilitate comments from other participants. If a whole case analysis or even an entire SWOT analysis was presented in one message posting, referencing comments to different points in the posting would become problematic.

A second problem relates to grading the cases. Since, technically, all cases are open until the end of the term, grading will have to wait until the end of the term. This is usually intolerable to students (and rightly so!). Hence, preliminary grades have to be assigned. This is not necessarily bad, since a low preliminary grade (if deserved) motivates additional work. A good yardstick is to grade remedial work more stringently.

Exhibit IV: Examples of Posters Directing Attention to Relevant URLs

Message no. 93 Posted by Jack Kroger 1 1 (jkkroger) on Sat Sep 22, 2001 17:49 The advantages and strengths in A-BII's plan is its two pronged approach of -

Building Budweiser into an international brand.

Building an international business through equity alliances with leading foreign brewers.

A-BII two pronged approaches succeed because it realizes that there are already established, dominant and successful regional brewers and distributors familiar with satisfying a particular local population's taste in beer. Rather than taking on Corona, Mexico, and Antarctica, Brazil, A-BII has developed a mutually beneficial relationship to both grow the regional beer and that of Budweiser. The alliances coupled with the sharing of Board seats unite potential foes into allies. Distribution agreements in eleven Latin American countries will further allow the development of Budweiser as an American icon throughout the rest of Central America.

Please note that the case focuses primarily on Latin America because it is one of the keys to long term growth in the international beer business and since it is one of the world's youngest fastest-growing beer market. Other

successful agreements have taken place throughout the world, notably Tsingtao Brewery in China. Tsingtao beer is the number one Chinese beer imported into the United States and is a leading brewer in the Chinese market.

More on Tsingtao-

<http://www.bartoninc.com/tsingtao/welcome.htm>

http://eng.stockhouse.com.hk/shfn/feb01/020901hk_tsingtao.asp

In conclusion-

In the past A-BII has tinkered with its formula and marketed Budweiser under different names to give a local flavor the beer but had absolutely no success. A-BII will continue to successfully identify, execute and manage significant brewing acquisitions and joint ventures, partnering with the number-one or number-two brewers in growing markets.

In the second prong of the plan the goal is to make Budweiser a global icon, like McDonald's golden arches or Coca-Cola through distribution agreements, leveraging the global American icon of Budweiser and pin pointed use of local Advertising agencies to brand Budweiser. A-BII is partnering with its distributors both on local and national advertising and promotional campaigns, which will further strengthen A-BII's market position and brand recognition.

The final successful point of A-BII is its use of new media for significant market penetration by utilization of Direct TV for the Latin market, wise event sponsorships such as the World Cup and utilization of other growing Spanish media sources.

What A-BII has done is to successfully develop a win-win business approach that taps into the leaders in the particular foreign market while developing the Budweiser American icon at the same time.

Message no. 756 Posted by Danielle Carter 2 3 (dj-carter) on Thu Dec 13, 2001 15:17

The link below takes you to an article about A-BII buying a 14% of Chilean-based Compania Cervercerias Unidas (NYSE: CCU), a beverage company operating primarily in Chile and Argentina. CCU is the leading brewer in Chile, holding 90 percent domestic market share. The article gives more detail.

I thought the article was interesting because it backs up the case study and shows that A-BII is continuing their strategy with regards to going global. With this strategy, it is important to "pick your partners wisely." If CCU holds 90% of domestic market share in Chile, they might be a good choice.

http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m0EIN/2001_Jan_4/68729308/p1/article.jhtml?term=Anheuser-Busch

Conclusion and Future Direction

Based on this exercise, the authors are convinced that there is a significant synergistic effect in blending on-line discussions with the case method of instruction. Future research should be directed at quantifying the incremental benefits of this approach through evaluation using behavioral learning models.

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