

ARTICLE

Case Study Teaching in An Asian Context: Challenges and Discoveries; Failures and Successes

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the challenges and discoveries, as well as the failures and successes, of case study teaching in an Asian context. The case study method is pragmatic as it explains difficult concepts in a classroom environment. Case study teaching operationalises both concepts and theories with ease and encourages students to be critical in their evaluation. This paper compares the performance of students (over four years) for an undergraduate module that is taught using the case study method, with students' grade in the exam as evidence for the analysis. General findings do not deviate from the literature. That is, there are natural impediments in the administering of case study teaching in an Asian environment such as the reclusive nature of students and a glaring inclination towards grades. These can compromise desired learning outcomes and negate critical thinking. Common feedback from Asian students includes uncertainty and vagueness in classroom discussions. The key contribution of this paper purposes how students can be encouraged to participate in meaningful classroom discussions. These include appropriate use of evidence and setting boundaries in classroom debates.

Keywords: Case study teaching, Asian undergraduates, challenges and discoveries, failures and successes

INTRODUCTION

The case study method is a pragmatic and proven teaching approach in developing students' understanding of industries and sectors. This approach introduces a factual corporate scenario into a classroom environment where students enjoy the triumphant outcomes of strategic business decisions; as well as appreciate the urgency of swift decision making in difficult business situations. It is a useful complement to teaching and learning. The benefits are distinctly documented—see Christensen et al. (1991); Dillon (1994); and Wassermann (1994)—and is a popular method in business schools and applied learning institutes. Academically, case studies have been used to test existing theories (Gibbert et al., 2008) and to build theories in new topic areas (Eisenhardt, 1989).

A commonly used case-study resource for teaching is that of Harvard University's case study. Published case studies from this traditional approach focuses on international corporations' learnings that are skewed towards a non-Asian context. There is pressure in the developing and teaching of Asian cases to allow informed judgments of emerging Asian economies. With the use of a relevant Asian case, students can relate and comprehend the complex underlying rules dictating the decisions of the organisation(s) studied. However, there are local complexities that may compromise the effectiveness of case teaching in an Asian setting. As this approach gains traction, it is critical that failures and successes are identified, and challenges and discoveries documented.

THE USE OF CASE STUDIES

Although the case study approach was deemed to be in a crisis (Yin, 1981) and debated by scholars four decades ago, the case study method teaching has been acknowledged by the teaching community and remains an effective teaching and learning resource. A commonly used resource is that of the Harvard University's case study pioneered in the 1920s¹; and it has since become the gold standard for case study method. As the world economy evolved with changes which include disruptions, globalisation, pandemics, and the rise of Asian economies over the past century; case teaching and learning ought to remain relevant in its approach and content. Contextually, published Harvard case studies are predominantly of non-Asian content. However, a crisis in case study this is not, as there are journals analysing Asian case studies.

Case studies have been used in various academic settings. They include a four-module training programme in the information technology sector (Gorman, 2011); advertising principles course (Celuch & Slama, 1999); higher level accountancy courses (Tschopp, 2004); higher level information and communication technologies study (Adria & Rose, 2004); undergraduate entrepreneurship course (Bumpus & Burton, 2008); and business administration at the postgraduate level (Rafferty, 2013). Cases have also reviewed team-teaching at the postgraduate level (Helms et al., 2005); suggested that gender biases against women are not encouraged (Ruhe & Allen, 1999) in case writing; and the use of multimedia cases for the net generation (Sheppard & Vibert, 2016).

Practical case studies have been used as aids in basic accounting education (Roth, 1986) to bring the realities of accounting practice into the classroom as business simulation games are less desirable compared to case studies (Tanner et al., 2012). Outside of the Americas, case studies have documented African business schools using the case of Ghana (Brown & Masten, 1998); and enhance student learning experience in the United Arab Emirates (Sayani et al., 2019). With the bulk of cases in non-Asian contexts, there is certainly an urgency to develop and teach Asian cases for informed judgments of emerging Asian economies. In addition, there is a need to understand the use of Asian cases in the Asian classroom.

This paper seeks to exemplify the uniqueness of local complexities compared to those of non-Asian setting when operationalising the case study method in an Asian classroom. There are natural impediments from case study teaching in the Asian classroom (Delios & Makino, 2001); in particular, a glaring inclination towards grades. Explanations to grade bias point to the belief and culture of student learning (Chan et al., 2016; Jackson, 2003, 2004; McNaught et al., 2005; Raza et al., 2020), familiarity with didactic modes of teaching and learning (Chen et al., 2013; Jackson, 2003), and the reclusive nature of students (Delios & Makino, 2001; Jackson, 2003, 2004; Raza et al., 2020). Further, Jackson (2003, 2004), McNaught et al. (2005), and Ti and Yang (2022) argued that culture and the extent of emotions in learning and teaching, especially from an Asian perspective should not be undermined. Dobinson (2020) suggested that being aware of how Asian students are perceived when they are the minorities also serves as a strong platform for a supportive learning environment.

Although the evidence for direct causation between students' demographic and grade inclination is weak, the literature suggests an element of societal inertia in attitude and perceptions to case base teaching in an Asian context. Though case base teaching is comparable to traditional modes of transmission, it remains far from superior (Chan et al., 2016). However, case base teaching continues to stimulate and underpin the acquisition of attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Shan et al., 2012) which motivates students to solve practical problems (McNaught et al., 2005). Thus, case base teaching displays a favourable effect on learners' attitude, skills, and ability (Chen et al., 2013). Students' reticence highlights the need for culture and context-specific class preparation (Jackson, 2003). Hence, there is a need to understand how case base teaching better students' ability, attitude, engagement, motivation, and performance.

Much as faculty perceives value from case base teaching, the reticence from students' discussions in a classroom may be explained by Asians' familiarity from a transmission mode of learning (Jackson, 2004). Uncertainty and vagueness are common reactions in response to case base classroom discussions. Thus, discourses from the outcome of this study aim to seek improvements to the case teaching process and add greater academic rigour in the use of the case study method. The outcome(s) is discussed quantitatively and qualitatively in anticipation that the undergraduate learning experience will be enhanced; as well as promoting insights for curriculum design.

Following this, the methodology undertaken for this study will be discussed. In the subsequent section, results of the study will be shared. Findings from the study such as challenges and discoveries, as well as failures and successes, will also be presented. A final section on enhancing the undergraduate experience with the case study approach and proposed solutions for curriculum design concludes this article.

METHODOLOGY—AN ASIAN EXAMPLE

The case study method was utilised for an undergraduate programme offered by an institute of higher learning in Singapore. A brief synopsis of the case in question is appended below for reference:

The island state Singapore prides itself with effective top-down policy making where a significant policy milestone it undertook at independence was to build affordable public housing for the then population of 300,000. As the population grew and faced with land limitation, the government embarked on a land reclamation exercise with 0.2 square kilometers of newly created usable land reserved for public housing. The eastern suburbs of Marina Bay, Kallang, Siglap, Bedok, and Changi (the island's international airport) are residing on this parcel of reclaimed land. Today, about 80% of the island state's population is housed in public housing provided by the Housing and Development Board (HDB). There had been obstacles and hurdles on this journey of affordable (and) safe public housing for the Singapore public. What can HDB do to pursue relevance in a changing landscape?

And to what extent can HDB remain true to its core mission of providing accessible and affordable public housing. More importantly, how can HDB maximize the social wellbeing of Singaporeans?

This approach was employed in a first year core module, Principles of Economics, during the academic years (AY) 2017/18 (44 students), 2018/19 (35 students), 2019/20 (40 students), and 2021/22 (55 students).² There are 12 teaching weeks in each semester and each seminar has a duration of four hours. The class was given Weeks One and Two to comprehend the given case; followed by an hour of class discussions on subsequent weeks throughout the semester. The total time spent discussing the case totals to 10 hours over a semester (one hour per week from Week Three). Students (mostly of Asian descent) undertaking this core module have credentials from a range of disciplines such as aeronautical, aviation management, engineering, food sciences, forensic, hospitality studies, information technology, accounting and finance, banking and finance, finance and technology.

The objective of using a case study approach is to operationalise key concepts and to highlight assumptions and limitations of select theories. Students were made aware during Week One of the semester that this is an assessable case for the module's final exam. Class interaction was facilitated by role-playing where students would act the part of various stakeholders. This enables students to fully immerse themselves in lesson learning and be critical about relevant theories, whilst being engrossed with key concepts. The same case study was used for all AYs and questions at end of case studies served as discussion points. Students were encouraged to critique both the questions as well as responses from the rest of the class. An analysis across four offerings of the same core module was undertaken to distinguish the challenges and discoveries, as well as the failures and successes.

RESULTS

Responses to the case study constitutes 50% of the final exam and students are permitted a one-page cheat sheet. There are four compulsory questions to the case study which must be answered. The results are presented below with a table of grade distribution, figure of grade distribution, and a table with key metrics.

Table 1

Grade Distribution for Academic Year (AY) 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20, and 2021/22

| Grade Range | AY2017/18 | AY2018/19 | AY2019/20 | AY2021/22 |
|--------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 70-79 | | | 7 | 2 |
| 60-69 | 5 | | 20 | 13 |
| 50-59 | 15 | 7 | 10 | 5 |
| 40-49 | 15 | 8 | 2 | 13 |
| <39 | 9 | 20 | 1 | 22 |
| Total | 44 | 35 | 40 | 55 |

There were five students who scored more than 60 for the case study in AYs 2017/18 and 2018/19; in comparison, there were students who scored more than 60 in AY2019/20 (20 students) and 2021/22 (13 students). Overall, the number of students who achieved more than 70 remained small in AYs 2019/20 (seven students) and 2021/22 (two students). In stark contrast, the highest grade was in the range of 50-59 for AY2018/19 with seven students. The spread of the grade is evenly distributed but short of being normalised

in AY2018/19. On the other hand, AYs 2018/19 and 2021/22 are positively skewed with a heavy tail where many students scored below 39. There is an outlier for AY2019/20 with one student scoring below 39. Figure 1 shows the grade distribution for each AY.

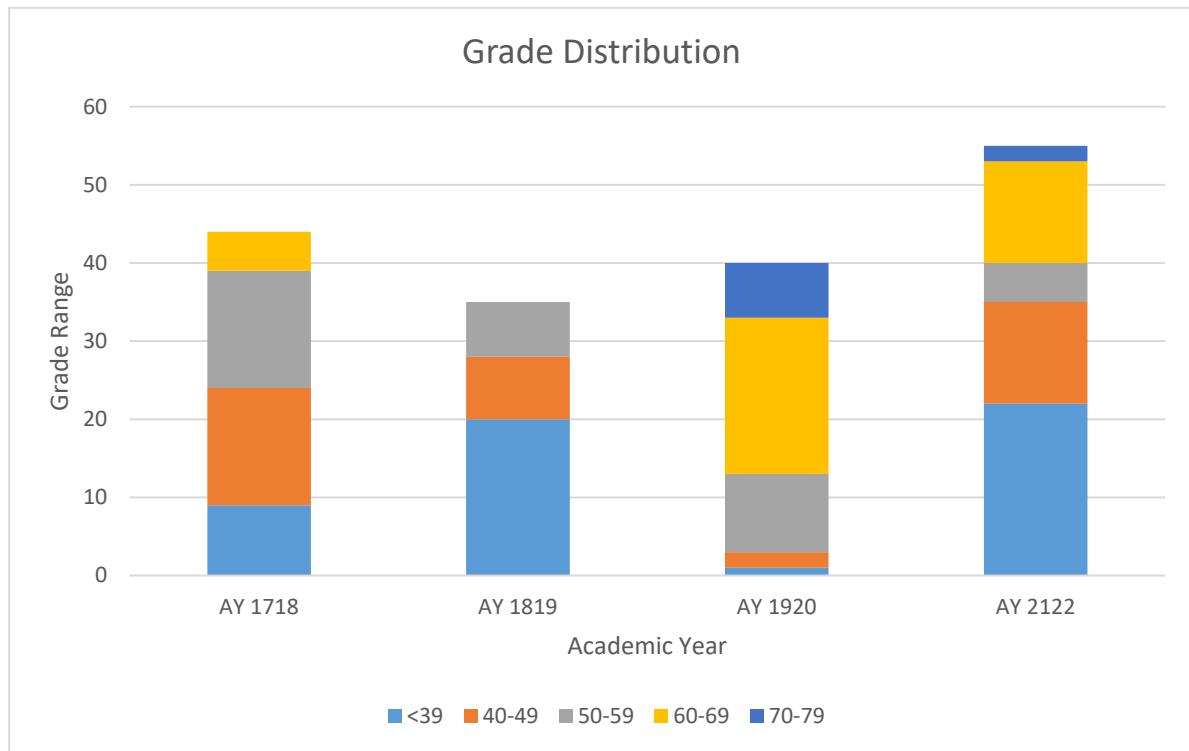


Figure 1. Grade Distribution

Table 2

Key Metrics

| | AY2017/18 | AY2018/19 | AY2019/20 | AY2021/22 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Mean (out of 100) for case study questions | 47.35 | 39.19 | 61.20 | 45.85 |
| Standard Deviation | 9.65 | 8.42 | 7.79 | 14.04 |
| Highest Score (out of 100) | 67 | 53 | 76 | 75 |
| Lowest Score (out of 100) | 25 | 23 | 38 | 18 |
| Mean (out of 100) for other questions | 52.65 | 60.81 | 38.80 | 54.15 |
| Sample Size (number of students in the module) | 44 | 35 | 40 | 55 |

The mean of the case study was similar which is greater than 45 in AY2017/18 (47.35) and 2021/22 (45.85). These are lower than AY2019/20 (61.2) but higher than AY2018/19 (39.19). The largest standard deviation is in AY2021/22 (14.04) relative to the other AYs (9.65 in 2017/18, 8.42 in 2018/19, and 7.79 in 2019/20). A large standard deviation indicates that the scores are spread far from the mean and a small standard deviation indicates that scores are clustered closely around the mean. This is evident in AY2021/22 where the highest score is 75 and lowest score is 18; and in AY2019/20 where the highest score is 76 and lowest score is 38.

As the mean steady states at greater than 45 (average mean over four AYs of 48.4) and standard deviation (14.04) peaking at last of the four observed semesters, students appear to have become accustomed to the case study approach. The final exam is made up of four short answer (case study) questions and two essay (other) questions with the weightage of marks equally distributed (50/50). Students perform relatively well in other questions, and this is reflected by higher mean (average mean over four AYs of 51.6 in comparison to 48.4).

This raises the hypothesis that there are other factors which determine how Asian students would fare in a case teaching approach. Table 3 highlights the number of emails corresponding on the case study between instructor and students over the observed semesters. There were more email queries on the case study in AY2017/18 relative to the other semesters and this is on a declining trend. Although there is no evidence that more queries lead to better class performance, the role of the instructor is not to be undermined. These are valid claims for future research directions.

Table 3

Statistics of the Grade Distribution, Email Correspondence on Case Study

| | AY2017/18 | AY2018/19 | AY2019/20 | AY2021/22 |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Class Mean (out of 100) for case study questions | 47.35 | 39.19 | 61.20 | 45.85 |
| Sample Size (number of students in the module) | 44 | 35 | 40 | 55 |
| Number of emails exchanged (pertaining to case study) | 15 | 3 | 3 | 1 |

CHALLENGES, DISCOVERIES, FAILURES, AND SUCCESSES

Empirical evidence supported by numbers (Tables 1-3 and Figure 1) offers insight into how students perform in case study learning and the instructor's role in case study teaching. There are several observable points—some are subtle whilst some are less subtle from a case study approach over a 12-week teaching semester. This sub-section will attempt to list the challenges, discoveries, failures, and successes of the use of an Asian case study in an Asian classroom.

Challenges

The challenges include demand by students for accepted answers to case discussion questions. This is demonstrated by many students scoring less than 39, where they tend not to address their ambiguities and uncertainties. There is a sense that students are less than prepared to engage as they feel strongly against this approach of teaching for a core module. This is supported by an extreme inclination to grades as opposed to experimental learning with the use of cases. It is also observed that only a handful of students are comfortable with asking questions and speaking without being prompted (demonstrated by a small number of students scoring in the higher grade range).

Discoveries

It was discovered that some students remain grade-driven and are reluctant to explore alternative ways of learning. This is evidenced by low means and large standard deviation which suggests strong inertia against case study with wide ranging scores. This is consistent with the explanation on grade biasness such as the

belief and culture of student learning (Chan et al., 2016; Jackson, 2003, 2004; McNaught et al., 2005; Raza et al., 2020) and familiarity with didactic modes of teaching and learning (Chen et al., 2013; Jackson 2003). Students need to be encouraged and incentivised for classroom discussion participation as they could not appreciate that the case study approach allows them to grasp theoretical concepts better. Speaking up in class is no longer deemed to be confrontational as the instructor aids in setting boundaries of students' debates. This is also helped where an online platform is accessible for students to verbalise their thoughts and post their responses in discussion forums.

Failures

There will always be a percentage of the class who chose not to participate in discussions and would expect answers to be shared. Some students remain devoted to the traditional textbook and tutorial approach to learning. This approach has also failed in stimulating student interest in a core module. The utility from class discussions starts to decline after the eighth week (post-semester break) when the class loses focus to other module deliverables. The academic performance of students' prior admission to the undergraduate programme could have been taken into consideration.

Successes

Students can relate to a case with local context and are familiar with the issues faced. Select students can grasp the technique of asking good questions and appreciate the dilemma faced by the organisation after four weeks. It is also observed that students are noticeably more confident over the weeks of discussions and questioning, which will be beneficial to their educational development. Passionate students are tapped as leaders in classroom discussions.

In summary, there are clear challenges, discoveries, failures, and successes in this attempt to analyse a case study approach of teaching of an Asian case study in an Asian classroom. The key contribution of this paper purposes how confidence can be instilled in students to participate in meaningful classroom discussions. These include appropriate use of evidence, setting boundaries in their debates, and a liberal setting for sharing of opinions (classroom engagement).

The aim of using case studies in teaching is to introduce a complicated situation into a safe classroom setting whilst enabling the class to visualise the problems an organisation is going through. When discussion questions are crafted to invite critical thinking, the operationalisation of theories and concepts can be made with ease. Constructive classroom debates enable critical thinking which helps to crystallise frameworks for students who may (otherwise) struggle with a traditional classroom teaching approach. A small number of Asian context cases (relative to non-Asian) could also contribute to the lack of engagement and less than desired outcomes from case study learning in an Asian classroom.

Hence, it is hoped that with the use of an Asian case, students will be able to better comprehend the complex underlying rules of decision making, as well as the theories and concepts which govern the decisions. The Asian case selected has a local focus, with a clear problem, and allows students to role-play. However, students continue to struggle (evidenced by low mean scores in general) even though the case is of a local Asian context. Perhaps, this can be attributed to students being less inclined to participate in class discussions (and are more comfortable in a unidirectional facilitation). In general, this remains to be an academic debate with documented challenges in an Asian classroom. See Hansen (1994); Hallinger and Lu (2011); and Tompson and Tompson (1997).

Proposed Solutions

To a certain extent, there are ways to address and resolve the observations stated above. However, it must be noted that improvements are unlikely to occur within the short run of observed semesters. Given any study, there are limitations in terms of varying factors that can affect the expected outcome. One immediate recommendation is to review the sequence in which a case discussion takes place in the classroom. Since Asian students may not be comfortable with speaking up and could be new to case study teaching, one way to introduce the case study form of classroom learning is to have a select group of students present their views about the case study. Furthermore, instead of the teaching being instructor-led (with suggested answers to discussion questions, and students encouraged to critique both the discussion questions and suggested answers) or even student-led (only discussion questions are made available with no suggested answers). A hybrid of the two can be introduced, that is, suggested answers to one question can be shared with the class. This introduces case study teaching where students are encouraged to air their views and articulate their arguments. As the class gets acquainted with the process, the balance of the discussion questions (with no suggested answers) will be tabled with contributions from the class.

Another recommendation is to revitalise the student experience with novelty to stimulate interest in classroom case teaching. This can involve the utilisation of technology which students are accustomed to. Specifically, cases can be introduced in virtual reality where audio and visual effects make the context real for students to comprehend. Interactive interviews could also be incorporated for the organisation in study to provide an engaging experience to students. Students would also be able to interact on the platform (which is less intimidating as opposed to speaking up) which can address reclusiveness and encourage interaction. The mindset of the instructor facilitating the classroom discussion must also be considered where a growth mindset bodes a fruitful teaching-studying-learning process (Ronkainen et al., 2019). Nam-Nguyen (2021) confirmed the role of learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-content interactions in creating an impactful online experience from students usually stereotyped as passive learners. Although some had argued that technology (Wong, 2019) is one of many aspects of teaching innovation, this differs from the general view prevailed in the literature. Wong (2019) further suggested that differences in the scale of institutions (in terms of number of students) can possibly influence the kind of teaching innovations adopted. Thus, the use of technology must be scaled in accordance with student numbers.

The results (including discussion on challenges, discoveries, failures, and successes) and proposed solutions have exemplified the uniqueness of Asian complexities with discourses to enhance the case learning and teaching process. It is hoped that these would add to the needed rigour in a case study approach.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper argues that case study teaching in an Asian context has its challenges and discoveries, as well as failures and successes. This case article uses an Asian organisation to exemplify the uniqueness of local complexities compared to those of non-Asian setting when operationalising the case study method in an Asian classroom. A comparison study of four offerings of a core module is used to demonstrate quantitative and qualitative discourses in a case study approach. It is hoped that this experience in case study education can offer suggestions to enhance the undergraduate experience, and promote new experiences for curriculum design.

The challenges, discoveries, failures, and successes serve to highlight the ways in which traditional methods of case study teaching can be adapted to students' learning capacities and classroom expectations. It is recommended that some adaptation to traditional teaching (teacher-led versus student-led) takes place. That is, the instructor takes a more effective role to manage the case discussion process and establish an environment for constructive debates to occur. Such an environment can be achieved by providing suggested answers to one question, followed by class critique. Subsequent questions will be discussed without suggested answers. This offers opportunities for small group discussion, which is the bedrock for engaging in-class discussion of cases.

Although there are clear challenges and failures highlighted in this paper, there are also discoveries and successes that aid towards the approach for this core module in the future. A small number of Asian cases implies that the luxury of choices is not offered to instructors wishing to utilise case studies as a teaching tool in an Asian classroom. Furthermore, the use of an Asian case in an Asian classroom remains one laden with traditional stigmas. Students can be reclusive and yet with a glaring inclination towards grades. Their interest in non-conventional learning is less than desirable and wanes as uncertainty and vagueness set in.

The process of selecting an appropriate case depends on the audience. Given the student profile (such as educational background, needs and motivation), the case (used for teaching in this scenario) will be useful over more observed semesters. However, the context of the case is barely relevant when the audience fails to engage. One could read one book to understand the solution to a problem; or read many books to uncover many solutions to the same problem (White, 2018). Therefore, another solution is the use of virtual reality; this signals an embracing of technology to stoke the interest of individual students in a novel method of case study teaching delivery.

[APPENDIX I](#)

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ENDNOTES

1. <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/about-us/>.
2. This approach was not carried out in AY2020/21 due to Covid-19 restrictions.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that work in this study is original that has not been previously published and has not been supported by any form of funding.

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