Analyses of Case-Based Learning in Online MBA Program: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Introduction

A business school puts high values on ‘theories into practices’ in which students conduct real-world tasks as much as or more than any other fields. With extensive application of knowledge and skills, case-based learning has been regarded as a powerful pedagogical tool across business disciplines. A case plays a vital role in areas such as accounting, business law, management, marketing, finance, and information systems.

Some benefits of the case-based learning method include the development of connections between theoretical and practical knowledge, student engagement, reasoning, and reflective decision-making (Lundeberg, Levin, & Harrington, 1999; Wang & Bonk, 2001). Such skills are necessary for MBA students to be ready to perform well in real-worlds, conduct ill-structured tasks, and be able to make decisions based on constantly changing sources of information.

However, despite the growing popularity of using the case-based approach in distance education of business, Oram (1998) indicated that most online case studies adopt traditional text-based materials, resources, and approaches. There is little agreement about such fundamental issues as how to support online case-based activities, and what to assess the learning performance of online case-based activities. It is unclear how online MBA courses have been designed to support students’ learning experiences with case-based activities.

This study focuses on the review on current states of online case-based learning as a way of MBA professional development. It explores the perceptions of instructors and students on actual implementations of case-based learning within an online MBA program, from both pedagogical and technological perspectives. The results of the study are expected to enable instructors to better understand the key components of online case-based learning to understand how to create meaningful environments.

Literature review

Case-based learning in a business school context is defined as a method that “involves studying actual business situations, written as an in-depth presentation of a company, its market, and its strategic decisions, in order to improve a student's problem-solving ability. Cases typically investigate a contemporary issue in a real-life context. There are multiple issues to consider and many correct or viable alternatives to solve the case issues are presented” (Helms, 1999, pp.71). This definition echoes that case-based learning can help students prepare to deal with real-world problems that they will face at the time when they leave an academic environment, and ultimately to find success within a specific business organization or profession by using these previously learned skills and experiences.

With the case study method, students are prompted to recall, anchor, and integrate their prior experiences to analyze cases and to explore solutions to identified problems in the cases through discussions, reasoning, reflection, and decision making (Lundeberg, Levin, & Harrington, 1999; Wang & Bonk, 2001). Cases that present real or hypothetical problems and scenarios can prompt deep discussions to develop solutions (Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 1999). Designing activities with interesting and pedagogically sound cases that closely relate to course topics is important for student engagement in learning.

The case-based learning approach can be equally effective in online as it is in a traditional face-to-face classroom settings (Cheney, 2000, as cited in Rouke & Anderson, 2002). In fact, it is a tradition that case studies have been conducted in individual learning modes, not collaborative ones. However, Learning is an engaging process under which students build knowledge through social interactions and collaboration (Liu, Lee, Bonk,
cases were used in several courses and some innovative use of technology (e.g., Breeze chat tool, Case Builder tool, etc.) for online case-based learning was applied to ensure the quality of case studies. Interestingly, several pilot instructors developed ‘story-based scenario’ and the scenarios of these cases were embedded in an online environment with threaded discussions, polling, and online resource exploration. As a result, these cases proved to be more engaging and appealing from the students’ perspectives.

Also, the study indicates that there were several factors that affect instructors in transforming the format of text-formatted cases. For instance, there might be financial constraints, copyright issues, long development time, pedagogical concerns, and heavy uncertainty about the educational benefit and cost ratio of case transformation. These concerns and issues can interfere with diverse formats of delivery such as multimedia based case presentation for dual coding effects of learning.

On the other hand, the instructors extensively vary in terms of choosing individual work or group work or some combination of both for students working on case analysis. In quantitatively-gearred courses, the instructors tended to emphasize individual processing skills on the case analysis. In more judgmental courses, they were more focused on the group work and extensive case discussions. In general, students considered group work is a better approach for complex case problems. However, due to their busy schedule and locations in different time zones, the difficulties in coordination tended to be a frustrating experience for students to work in teams. The free-riding issues also affected students’ satisfaction in teamwork associated with online case-based learning.

The MBA courses varied in terms of the degree of instructional support and guidance for effective case-based learning activities. Some instructors took advantage of the courseware tools and technological features. For instance, the course announcement in the course management systems were the most frequently used tool for presenting hints, guidelines, and thinking sheets that can scaffold students’ online case-based learning. However, about one-third of the instructors actually moderate discussion forums to redirect and augment students’ arguments.

Asynchronous discussion forums are used in almost all the courses in case-based discussions at either class-level or group-level. While most instructors tended to prefer to use this medium as tools for facilitating in-depth reflection on cases and high quality discussions, students tended to be frustrated by the impersonal feature and delayed exchange of information. When group conducted case analyses and were able to select their communication tools, teleconferencing tools were regarded as efficient and effective tools for brainstorming and decision making in case-based discussions. In the meantime, asynchronous discussion forums were mostly used to upload and download deliverables and share case information. Chat rooms were not used effectively in facilitating case-based learning activities. Part of the reason for limited use of real-time chat tools were the low comfort level of instructors with such tools and the constraints of chat systems. Simply put, it is not easy to stimulate in-depth thinking and quality case analyses or discussions in a synchronous chat environment. Among the key difficulties was scheduling time for participants to attend a synchronous chat session. Consequently, email is used by instructors to post instructions and

Magjuka, & Liu, in press). Thus, group discussions and collaborations are the most important parts of online case-based learning, according to Rourke and Anderson (2002).

Findings and implications

This study is conducted in an accredited online MBA program at a top ranked business school in a large Midwestern university. The program has grown to include hundreds of students in just a few years and was reviewed as a representative program to examine issues of online case-based learning. Data collected in this study included content analyses of course documents and class assignments, surveys of students, and interviews of faculty members and students.

The study findings confirm that case-based learning has been one of the widely used instructional methods in the online MBA program. From both students and instructors’ perspectives, the attainment of the equivalent quality of online courses with their counterparts in face-to-face settings seemed to be an underlying goal, and at times, a mandate, for delivering online courses. While this creates a positive culture in this program for achieving high standards of online education, in certain ways the online instructors tended to replicate the classroom-based learning as much as possible in the online environment. Thus, many instructors retained the same course packet formats for teaching business content in online courses. Lengthy, heavy text-based cases still were the dominant format in many of courses.

Other types of case learning such as personal reflections, students’ case generation and evaluation based on personal job settings, online expert commentaries or evaluations, and role assignment in case discussion can be considered (Bonk & Dennen, 2003; Bonk, Hara, Dennen, Malikowski, & Supplee, 2000). Such studies take advantage of the diversified adult learners’ backgrounds and the capabilities of technology to break the temporal and physical barriers. However, these activities were not used much in the online MBA program. In stead, simulation formats for teaching business content in online courses. Lengthy, heavy text-based cases still were the dominant format in many of courses.

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specifications of the case analysis. From the students’ side, the email is mainly used for clarifying administrative issues.

Conclusion

This study indicates that the case-based learning method is a key approach in the online MBA program just as in traditional MBA courses. The results of this study provide instructors and educational practitioners with some implications for instructors around the globe who plan to implement case-based learning activities. Clearly, those in other professional schools will be interested in practical guidance and support on how to effectively make a successful transition of the traditional case study method to the online case-based learning approach, and on how to embed pedagogical strategies of case-based learning in their online courses.

This study provides a starting point for understanding the current status of case-based learning in an online MBA program. Further, a systematic research agenda need to be established in the areas of virtual group work, online moderating, online mentoring, online performance and information support, and tools to support case-based learning and student interactions.

One issue centers an interest in socio-cultural aspects of online case-based learning. They may want to know how to design effective group work to solve online cases, how to embed dilemmas in cases that support social interactions and dialogue, and how to support instructor moderation in these environments. Further, instructors and support staff should realize that the success of online business courses depends on the appropriate use of pedagogy into business contexts, not on the introduction of advanced technology itself. Finally, policy makers, foundations, and government agencies should be aware of the findings here and target funding for the more powerful learning approaches and ideas.

References


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