

# Bringing the Manager to Class: The Live-Case Course Design as a Learning Space in International Business Teaching

**Mikael Hilmersson**

*Menlo College, School of Business, United States and School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Sweden*

**Jonas Fasth, Johan Jakobsson, and Niklas Åkerman**

*School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Sweden*

**Abstract.** Most of the learning by students occurs outside the lecture room. With reduced course budgets, growing student cohorts, and increased pressure for relevance, business instructors need to develop pedagogical approaches stimulating informal learning. This study investigates the live-case methodology as an innovative learning environment within international business education, with a particular focus on its role in operationalizing the concept of learning space. Over a period of five years, involving 300 students and 26 companies from three countries, we examine how live cases facilitate experiential learning by integrating the perspectives of students, instructors, and business professionals. Our findings reveal that live cases not only enhance student engagement and motivation but also foster a dynamic learning space where theory and practice intersect, contributing to both pedagogical practice and theoretical development in business education.

**Keywords:** live case, business teaching, experiential learning, learning space, international business.

## 1. Introduction

Successful teaching in any curriculum should seek to motivate students in the learning process. Considering the relatively few hours university instructors spend with students in class, we need to creatively develop and design novel and inspiring approaches stimulating student motivation. This is essential as the reality in many university contexts is that classes are becoming larger due to reduced university funding (Usher 2013; Huxley *et al.* 2015; Mitchell *et al.* 2018). Given that class sizes become larger, student learning needs to take place also outside of the lecture room, through application (Ramsden 2003). In many cases this application occurs involuntary and not with any dedicated learning purpose. Such application is acknowledged as informal learning (McGivney 1999), which

*This shortened version of the article is for promotional purposes on publicly accessible databases.*

*Readers who wish to obtain the full text version of the article can order it via the url*

<https://www.neilsonjournals.com/JIBE/abstractjibe19hilmerssonetal.html>

*Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson [pneilson@neilsonjournals.com](mailto:pneilson@neilsonjournals.com)*

© NeilsonJournals Publishing 2024.

is an essential part of the students learning experience. Since most learning among university students takes place when and where the instructor is not (physically) present (Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993) teachers and instructors need to develop tools motivating students to take responsibility for their learning outside the lecture room.

One commonly employed teaching technique that accommodates for informal learning is the case study method (Ambrosini *et al.* 2010; Emblen-Perry 2022) also known as case study teaching, case method of teaching and case-based learning. Introduced by Harvard Business School over a century ago (Thomas 2015; Emblen-Perry 2022), the case study method has gained popularity in business education (Pilz & Zenner 2018). The method involves students engaging in authentic or realistic case studies to learn by tackling actual-world challenges through academic rigor, by creating and sharing knowledge through unbiased and independent analysis (Chia & Holt 2006). The method is shown to help develop critical thinking, analytical skills (Emblen-Perry, 2022), social interaction through the exchanges of ideas (Bell 2019), and it enhances the capacity for creativity and innovation (Galloway *et al.* 2009), all required for future management careers.

The case study method often builds on cases that have been written beforehand and are made available for students to read and learn from. Due to the 'locked' format, such cases are referred to as still cases. Still cases have shown to be good tools for university instructors to bring challenges from the managerial world into the classroom (Böcker 1987). When using the still-case method, courses are simulating the management of bounded decision making and the processes of the firm (Roth & Smith 2009), thereby fostering the students' development of problem-solving, planning and organization skills (Chang & Rieple 2013).

The still-case method is a collaborative effort between instructors and students that enhances their understanding of management theory (Christensen & Carlile 2009). Nevertheless, the method has also received criticism. When an instructor, through a form of Socratic dialogue, poses thought-provoking questions and encourages the class to arrive at the 'correct' conclusions (Shugan 2006), such instructor behavior can result in unintentional or intentional bias (Ambrosini *et al.* 2010). Further, still cases typically involve analyzing a single dimension, such as a well-defined problem or a situation with well-articulated boundaries of the business (Pilz & Zenner 2018), that does not accurately represent real-world ambiguous situations where multi-dimensional answers are needed (Neck & Greene 2011; Townsend *et al.* 2018). Thereby, still cases may be less effective for management education since learners may miss out on exposure to the complexity of problems encountered in volatile and uncertain environments (Hillmann *et al.* 2018). In terms of addressing complex problems, still cases do not encourage students to develop forward reasoning skills needed to gather information, generate new knowledge, and create opportunities for change. These

skills are critical for students to prepare for managerial positions (Guerrero *et al.* 2016). Students need to be allowed to transcend the borders of the university and engage in real-life interactions and experiences (Johannisson 2016). Not addressing the ambiguities of the the ‘real world’ may lead to false confidence in students (Shugan 2006) making them fail to become effective leaders due to a lack of vigilance and proactive skills to deal with uncertainty and complexity (Neck & Greene 2011; Townsend *et al.* 2018).

### ***Addressing Still-Case Shortcomings Through Live Cases***

A method suggested to compensate for the shortcomings of still cases are so the called live cases, involving direct interaction between students and real organizations, where students are presented with current, real-world problems brought into the classroom (Laukkanen *et al.* 2013). This method integrates the live case project into both the course content and the pedagogical process, allowing students to engage in experiential learning (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). Experiential learning refers to the “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb 1984, p. 38). Although this study is not aimed at developing theory on experiential learning specifically it picks up on the processual nature of learning and the interrelatedness between the student and the environment for the creation of knowledge. Unlike traditional still-case methods, which often limit learning to theoretical analysis, live cases require students to navigate complex and ambiguous situations, where students are exposed to a diversity of decision-making opportunities revolving around a real business context, requiring students to explore multi-faceted aspects of the case rather than single-dimensional issues or situation typically found in traditional still cases (Emblen-Perry 2022). Such reality-infused learning environments are considered a prerequisite for higher-level learning (Cope 2003), fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability. Learning to deal with this type of situations not only needs to contain cognitive reasoning but also conative and affective learning including alertness, shrewdness, and prudence (Johannisson 2016).

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by exploring how the live case methodology functions not just as a teaching tool but as a multifaceted learning space that integrates the experiences of students, instructors, and industry professionals. Hence, emphasizing the social and actor-specific components of learning spaces (Leijon, Nordmo, Tieva & Troelsen 2024). By examining these interactions within a five-week live case project introduced in an international business course as part of a bachelor’s program, this paper seeks to operationalize the concept of learning space and assess its contributions to both theoretical development and practical application in business education. In response to recent calls for more research on live cases (Cummins & Johnson 2023), our systematic analysis provides valuable insights into the benefits and challenges of employing live cases as a pedagogical tool. It highlights the value

of extended collaboration with managers (Bhatti, Ramirez, & Athanasopoulou 2023) and the importance of strategically positioning live case projects within educational programs to enhance future live case activities (Roth & Smith 2009). In this study, we seek to understand how the the live-case methodology function as a learning space that facilitates experiential learning from the perspectives of different actors? In doing so, we also seek to develop an increased understanding of how this methodology contribute to the operationalization of the concept of learning space in business education? By addressing theses questions, we aim to identify the mechanisms through which live cases improve learning outcomes and foster an integrated, dynamic learning environment that benefits all participants. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on innovative didactic approaches by demonstrating how live cases can effectively bridge the gap between theory and practice in business education.

The remainder of this paper goes as follows. First, we present our frame of reference. Second, we present the method of our study and the data sources. Third, inspired by the Gioia method we explore, structure and discuss our data. Fourth, we reflect on our insights from 5 years of working with the live case methodology and discuss its potential as a pedagogical tool in business teaching and the theoretical implications of the study. Fifth, our paper is ended with a reflection on the potential shortcomings of study and its suggestions for future on the topic, which is followed by some concluding comments.

## **2. Frame of Reference**

### ***Learning From Experience and Learning Spaces***

In business, learning is expected to follow from experience. Experiential knowledge is tacit in nature (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995) and within the notion of tacit knowledge lies a subconscious component (Polanyi 1966) that requires an individual to actively taking part in order to learn. Penrose (1959) showed that one of the main reasons underlying firm competitiveness and growth is the organizations' ability to generate knowledge from the experience of individuals. Similarly, manager's experience is of importance for explaining a firm's success (Barney 1991). In the field of international business, which is the area of the live case project reported here, Johanson and Vahlne (1977, 2009) has shown that the main driving mechanism of the internationalization process of the firm is the development of experience. As a consequence, for students to be prepared for their future careers they do not need only to train their cognitive reasoning as a form of sense-making, but also conative and affective learning (Johannisson 2016). Conative in this regard refers to the fluidity and uncertainty relating to the direction of actions whereas affection regards the emotive force of entrepreneurial activities (Ibid.). Therefore, we can expect that students not only develop experience through live cases during their studies but also become equipped with