Designing Rigorous Online Case Discussions: A Transferable Six-Step Spine for International Business Courses

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Abstract. Online and hybrid business programs continue to expand worldwide, yet instructors report difficulty in sustaining rigorous, discussion-based courses in virtual environments. This paper proposes a simple, transferable spine for online case teaching grounded in predictable, high-leverage routines. The six-step model, *ASCEND*, aims to establish a stable instructional rhythm by replacing tool-heavy complexity, shifting routine cognitive processing to pre-class preparation using shared templates, enhancing the visibility of in-class reasoning through structured participation roles, and reinforcing accountability through concise post-class memos. These steps, namely scaffolded pre-class modelling, transparent calling rosters, time-boxed breakout production, poll–discuss–repoll cycles, scribe rotation, and evidence-based memo writing, are adaptable across disciplines, bandwidth conditions, and cultural contexts. Drawing on contemporary research in cognitive load, online engagement, and case-based pedagogy, the paper demonstrates the spine's workability, outlines steps for immediate implementation, and identifies pathways for department-scaling without eroding instructor autonomy. Practical guidance includes micro-scripts, equity considerations, low-bandwidth variants, program-level operating plans, and light evidence sources for continuous improvement. This practice-oriented contribution is a replicable blueprint for rigorous, equitable, and work-ready discussion learning in international business education.

Keywords: online learning, case method, work-readiness skills, participative learning, instructional design, virtual and hybrid pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Two conditions can coexist in business learning and practice. Digital burnout is real, even in 2024, with students and instructors continuing to report cognitive overload, reduced social presence, and declining motivation in digitally mediated classrooms (Wiederhold, 2020). Skill deficits are also evident. Employers and community partners continue to be frustrated with graduates' ability to quote reference theory but inability to make, defend, and trace professional judgements. Recent employer surveys across Asia, Europe, and North America consistently highlight gaps in analytical reasoning, decision structuring, and professional communication far more than gaps in disciplinary knowledge (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2024). The underlying challenge is pedagogical, not technological. Evidence from learning design suggests performance improves not by adding more digital tools but introducing a small set of predictable structures to help reduce cognitive load, increase perceived fairness, and strengthen participation, especially in online environments where attention fragments quickly (Sweller et al., 2019; Martin & Borup, 2022). It moves routine work out of scarce live time and makes students' thinking visible to cohort, ensuring educators' assessment corresponds to employers and community partners requirements. This approach strengthens assessment validity by aligning grading criteria with the authentic tasks, performance standards, and professional judgements that characterize contemporary workplace practice (Gulikers et al., 2004; Boud & Falchikov, 2006).

A recent study confirms that discussion-based learning remains a powerful pedagogical modality, however its effectiveness depends on an instructional rhythm that supports students with repeated, scaffolded opportunities to articulate decisions, test assumptions, and document their reasoning processes (Li, Oon, & Chai, 2024). This paper offers a practical spine an instructor can implement readily. It respects the craft of discussion-based learning and the practicalities of online delivery. The design is intentionally simple, measurable without surveillance, and oriented towards building capabilities relevant to employability, collaboration, and civic readiness. The routine is practice-led and built around the core features of digital learning environments. It leverages the native artefacts of online delivery, including shared templates, persistent canvases, structured polls, and chat exchanges, to cultivate professional behaviours and raises baseline levels of preparation and participation. Rather than adding tools, it intentionally constrains the ecosystem to a few reliable steps that can function effectively across bandwidth levels and cultural contexts. It is, therefore, not a technology prescription but a transportable learning design that traverses institutions and disciplines, relying on clear roles, visible artefacts, equitable participation norms, and light yet meaningful feedback loops.

Contemporary work in instructional science emphasizes constructive alignment as necessary for rigor in online and blended environments. When

coherently aligned, learning outcomes, classroom activities, and assessment encourage students to develop transferable decision-making skills rather than engage in performative compliance (Jones et al., 2021). Recent work shows that tools supporting the visualization and sharing of alignment, such as diagnostic course-design frameworks, improve coherence and instruction quality in distributed teaching teams (Trowsdale & McKay, 2023). This design centers on that alignment.

In this paper, the authors elaborate each instructional step with practical details, illustrate its application through short vignettes from multiple domains, and demonstrate how departments can adopt a shared pedagogical backbone while preserving instructor autonomy and disciplinary nuance. The goal is modest but important: to establish a dependable rhythm that elevates baseline quality, supports equitable participation, and prepares students for the analytical, communicative, and collaborative demands of professional and civic life.

2. Discussion-Based Teaching Online

Learners do not need more content transmission; they need disciplined habits for making decisions under uncertainty. This need spans domains, whether in diagnosing a patient pathway, sizing a project, prioritizing public services, critiquing a policy, or interpreting a financial performance. Discussion-based teaching builds these habits by placing students in situations where they must work with incomplete information, articulate trade-offs, construct plausible scenarios, and defend a position. These skills remain central to contemporary management and professional practice, which increasingly value judgment, reasoning, transparency, and collaborative problem-solving over content recall (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2024). Research on authentic learning environments similarly emphasizes that robust professional competence emerges from engagement with complex, situated learning tasks within the context of future application rather than passive content exposure (Herrington et al., 2014).

Online delivery does not alter the goal; it reconfigures the learning environment. Digital artefacts, including models, notes, polls, chat, and collaborative canvases, are natively captured, persistent, and revisitable. When intentionally designed, this persistence becomes a coaching asset rather than a distraction. It allows instructors to surface assumptions, interrogate pathways to a solution, and model standards for traceability without additional software. Research shows that online environments with visible reasoning artefacts help students externalize cognitive processes, compare approaches, and refine their analytical strategies more effectively than in ephemeral face-to-face discussions (Martin & Borup, 2022). This aligns with findings that students benefit from authentic online learning environments, because these gear them towards

effective application of their knowledge and collaboration with others (Herrington et al., 2007).

Online rooms also offer advantages that physical rooms rarely match without significant effort. Chat lowers the barrier for quieter students, multilingual learners, and culturally diverse cohorts who may be hesitant to interrupt or take early turns. Polls reveal prior assumptions and make-belief revision visible, enabling instructors to teach metacognition explicitly. Shared templates, editable canvases, and version histories preserve the audit trail of reasoning, key for teaching transparency, replicability, and professional documentation practices. When used sparingly and ethically, session recordings allow students to revisit key decision points and strengthen their own learning (Berg, 2025). While authentic e-learning frameworks emphasize the value of shared artefacts, transparency of process, and iterative refinement in developing higher-order reasoning, authentic online learning environments support sustained engagement, cognitive apprenticeship, and the development of professional judgment (Herrington et al., 2010).

When these affordances are embedded within a coherent instructional routine, online learning shifts from a passive archive to an engine for equitable participation and cognitive apprenticeship. Well-designed online discussion pedagogies distribute airtime more evenly, support shy or underrepresented students, and create opportunities for structured contributions that may be harder to orchestrate in a traditional classroom (Martin & Borup, 2022; Gillett-Swan, 2021). Thus, the online medium becomes not a constraint but a catalyst that makes thinking visible, democratizes participation, and strengthens the analytical foundations of decision-making.

3. Ascend: The Simple Spine

Building on this premise, the *ASCEND* instructional routine, comprising six steps that form a continuous rhythm, translates these affordances into a practical, repeatable structure for instructors.

A–Anchored preparation: The first step is a scaffolded pre-class model on a shared template. Its purpose is to raise baseline preparation and compress routine analytical work into the hours before class, preserving live/synchronous time for higher-order judgement. Implementation is straightforward: the instructor posts a one-page case brief two days before class with a single guiding prompt, attaches a structured template with required exhibits and minimum assumptions, sets an upload window that closes three hours before class, and asks students to include one sensitivity check or counterargument. A short micro-script clarifies expectations: "Before class, complete the shared template. List unit assumptions, build the minimum exhibits, and write a one-sentence decision. Upload by 10:00." Examples differ by discipline. In business finance, students