The use of case studies in management education is now universal and ubiquitous. So much so, this pedagogy is now taken for granted by the B-Schools. With ready availability of instructor accessories such as test banks, case teaching notes, and slides, instructors often miss out on the philosophical and scientific foundations of this important teaching pedagogy. They continue to emphasize the rational strategic analysis dimensions of case studies and end up in making the session a ‘do-it-yourself’ programmable kit. This paper argues that case methodology is highly context-specific in terms of effectiveness; therefore, the instructors must be careful about the choice and age of the case, keep in perspective the participants’ (students’) profiles, their background, and the lessons (conceptualizations) sought to be realized. This paper also highlights the second curve in the life of a typical MBA student and the process of his becoming a T-shaped knowledge-owner and a problem-solver. Later, through a matrix framework, the author brings forth the nature of problems faced by the managers. It is illustrated that unlike engineering solutions where usually there is one right way of doing things and the outcomes are fairly predictable, in strategic management cases, the problem complexity is often enormous and solutions could be multiple without an a priori (or even post-priori) categorical answer about the correct course of decision and action. This paper essentially deals with the following issues of case study method:

- Foundational, philosophical, and scientific bases of case method as a pedagogical tool.
- The need for instructors to be sensitive to the possibility of using case method with a good mixture of theoretical conceptualizations and lectures for arriving at inductive or deductive frameworks and heuristics.

The author shows how the case methodology seeks to overcome the limitations of the lecture method where one ‘guru’ comes and delivers ‘known’ knowledge in a highly structured format. In an ever-evolving dynamic scenario, it is important that the students develop heuristics and algorithmic capabilities (that is being ‘approximately right’) by thinking through the problem complexity and the likely impact of a managerial decision on a variety of forces in the near medium- and long-terms. The focus, thus, must not only be on the analysis of the content of strategy, but also on the underlying strategy-making processes. This ought to be clarified to the students of management that there are seldom situations in the corporate and public contexts that can be neatly summed up in standard answers.

The author argues that a case method class is a mission on creativity where many perspectives and backgrounds cross each other to produce a mix of strategic and innovative ideas. The role of case instructors ought to be to help students appreciate various viewpoints, harness the workable ideas, and then arrive at a common solution. This paper closes with the following recommendations:

- Case instructors must act like ideas- and perspectives-brokers and harnessers rather than imposing their own views in the classroom.
- Sessions could be great fun and learning experiences for all if, with prior preparation, instructors can bring forth examples and ideas from various fields and disciplines (including sports and entertainment).
Let no man ever contemplate an act ill-conceived and ill-considered, ill-done without proper scrutiny. Inspect a matter with utmost care before reaching conclusions and rushing into actions; else, bitter remorse is let loose.

— Panchatantra

The Panchatantra in India is the first known collection of fables and tales used as case studies for teaching the art and science of governance, administration, warfare, diplomacy, and public welfare (the original name Panch Tantra is derived from this). It contains in its five chapters, the lessons and conceptualizations of overarching vision, conducting strategic negotiations, and achieving strategic objectives. In many respects, these tales are the precursor to the prescriptions on realpolitik and rajdharma described in Arthashastra (circa 250 BC) and The Prince (circa 1505) written by Kautilya and Machiavelli respectively. The original work in Sanskrit has some of the tales that can be traced as far back as 1500 BC to the RigVeda.

The case studies and stories were narrated in a mixture of prose and verse by a sage, Vishnusharma, to three (supposedly) dull-witted sons of king Amarshakti of Mahilaropya, who himself was benevolent, a scholar, and a pious man. Vishnusharma’s task was to teach the three sons worldly wisdom including the softer skills needed to keep the citizens in the kingdom happy and motivated. The sons later on became wise kings in their own right known for their leadership qualities and skills in public administration. Vishnusharma was using a combination of inductive and deductive teaching tools to train his wards through the dominant logic of war stories and conceptualizations.

The use of case studies in management education is now universal and ubiquitous. So much so, this pedagogy is now taken for granted by the B-Schools. To my knowledge, Vikalpa (one of the oldest management journals in India, published by IIM-Ahmedabad) had not published a single article on this subject so far. It is noteworthy that IIMA is one of the pioneers in the use of case method in the country mainly because of its original association with Harvard Business School (HBS). The HBS itself is considered a pioneer in developing case method as a management teaching pedagogy. IMD in Switzerland claims to be using cases for more than 50 years.

The purpose of this paper is to make a comprehensive review of case method as a teaching pedagogy in management education, analyse what it takes to achieve the stated purpose of the pedagogy, develop frameworks to conceptualize the issues, and understand how to make best use of the available resources in the classroom.

The intention of an MBA programme is not only to train the students in the specific management science, but also to equip them to hold leadership positions in life, contributing meaningfully as change agents and creating ‘good’ wealth for the society while remaining socially responsible and ethical. The objective (stated on almost each B-School’s website) is to create change agents. The necessary abilities for such change masters would be strategic thinking power (cf. opening quote), ability to work in teams, excellent communication skills, empathy, wholesome view, creativity, technical competence, humility, and people-related skills. Does case method as a pedagogy help achieve these lofty aims? And, what does it mean for the instructors and students to arrive at them?

In this paper, we review some of these issues, develop frameworks to conceptualize the issues, and understand how to make the best use of the available resources in the classroom. In no way do we attempt to undermine other pedagogies; in fact, case method has to be often supplemented with a combination of other tools including videos, texts, and internet searches! Our primary focus here is on the foundational, philosophical, and scientific bases of case method as a pedagogy in management education. We shall avoid going into other related issues such as instructor’s choice of cases, case research, and case-writing and reporting.

THE SECOND CURVE: THE TYPICAL INDIAN MBA STUDENT

It is important to understand the context and classroom environment of a typical MBA class in India. This is crucial for all the protagonists using the cases.

In the Indian context of MBA curricula, understanding the classroom profile of incoming students is important. For most students coming straight from their under-graduate classes, this is a second curve (sort of a ‘discontinuity’ from the past) in their lives. The first curve occurs on joining college from the protected environments of school life — suddenly no bulky school bag, no uniform, no (less) attendance, less pressure about marks, and encounters with unions, strikes, ragging, etc. Most of them have never used the PowerPoint software for making a formal presentation in class. There is hardly
any teamwork involved in preparing for the classes. Pre-
class preparation is almost negligible — students simply
go to the class, passively attend the lecture, absorb
whatever they can, and, most often, not even ask a
question for clarification. The learning is geared to scoring
highly in end-of-the-year examinations. There is
practically no requirement for conducting research—
either primary or secondary. Students are normally not
aware of the different research methodologies. The ability
to analyse and synthesize a given situation or problem
is neither required nor encouraged. The double-loop
learning process that requires questioning and reflection
is absent most of the times. Such ‘adult’ students cannot
be taught; they must be willing to learn.

The biggest change for the MBA students, however,
is the shift from ‘learning by rote’ to ‘learning through
critical thinking.’ As the students progress through
various courses, realization dawns on the need for total
systems thinking combining management science (the
hard aspects of decision-making) with management art
(the softer art of implementation through people
management). In case studies, there are no lectures, no
information thrown at the students, no unique solutions
to problems (or even ‘logical’ answers). There is no
discrete case information. Students are expected to make
presentations, use the internet and library for research,
discuss the issues in teams and groups, and work on
tough deadlines. The quality of faculty (especially in
good B-Schools) would be substantially different from
the ones they have encountered before — many of them
could be in nationally important committees, consultants
to world-renowned companies, and educating some of
the best names in the corporate and administrative world.

In India, most MBA class compositions follow the
zeitgeist. They would have an average age of 22 years.
Almost one-fourth class is likely to be freshers — those
without any work experience; another fourth is likely
to have experience of less than one year while the balance
50 per cent would be having work experience of around
two years. As such, there is a fair sprinkling of entry-
level work experience that can make the class interesting.

Around 70-80 per cent students may have an engineering
or technology background (of which more than 50%
would be specialists in Computers/Electronics/IT in
tune with the times!). The girls-to-boys (G2B) ratio
could be anywhere between 10-20 per cent. Except for the six
Indian Institutes of Management, most B-Schools in India
would retain a regional-geographic bias in terms of faculty
and students. A high percentage of students would be
from the middle-class income levels who believe that
‘hard work will lead them to glory.’ The multi-cultural
diversity that India represents is, therefore, only mildly
represented in a typical MBA class. Even in terms of
international students, there would perhaps be no
representation. Compare this to a typical MBA class in,
say, International Business Strategy sessions at School
of Management at Bradford University. The G2B ratio
would be around 50 per cent and students would be
coming from all over the world. Most non-English country
students such as those from Japan, China, and Africa
overcome not only their language and cultural barriers
but also learn from each other about the customs and
expectations. This is a major asset in discussing and
devising a global strategy for, say, a fast food company.
Cases can bring out the cultural differences and value
processes that affect, say, the manner in which strategic
planning is done and sought to be executed by individuals
of varying backgrounds. The educational and cultural
diversity in the classroom is a major learning asset while
discussing and devising a global strategy for culture-
specific businesses such as fast food.

The incoming student faces several challenges never
faced before. He/she would be more responsible to
himself/herself in more ways than one. The emphasis
is on self-learning and self-regulation. The programme
is fully residential (there is no choice even for local
students). Personal ethics would come into play since
the orientation of learning and group experiences is
towards getting the best jobs. Instructors can be very
serious about submission deadlines. Each incoming
student gets an independent e-mail id and a 24-hour
internet connectivity (in hostel rooms in many institutes).
There exists no concept of juniors or seniors (it is not
uncommon for a college senior to take admission much
later in life to do an MBA — I was at IIM-Ahmedabad
in my mid-30s and some instructors were of my age or
less!). The environment is collegial and friendly.

The final major change for the students is that they
are required to provide feedback on the faculty at the
end of the course. They soon come to realize the meaning
and implications of this power!

Now we turn our attention to the knowledge-
competences, skills, and behavioural attributes sought
to be developed in an MBA student.
MAKING OF THE T-SHAPED MBA

Cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I am)
— Rene Descartes (Stumph, 1982).

Descartes thought that humans differed from animals in their ability to think and create new products by use of their mental faculties. Animals were more of automatons driven by training and programming. Without going into the merits or otherwise of his philosophical position on the differences, the important point is that humans can change their endeavour through their entrepreneurship, will-power, determination, vision about the future, and aspirations. Managers are supposed to provide all these inputs leading to betterment of the organization they work which, in turn, should lead to happiness and prosperity all around. These attributes are difficult to teach through lecturing—‘giving gyan’ as the street-smart students would term it. One has to dirty his or her hands, and then see how it all comes out. It is not unlike swimming or cycling — the student has to enter the pool or ride the bicycle to learn the balancing act and move forward. The case method allows the students to create mental structures and frameworks of a particular situation and a feeling of the context under which decisions are to be taken. But, there is a crucial difference here between a case study and a pure skill-oriented practice (such as sports or even surgery). In a management case study, the contexts are dynamic—either the technology shifts or competition makes new moves or the government policy undergoes a change. This calls for managerial judgments on a continual basis. Pure practice-oriented skills do not experience such rapid changes. Strategic thinking skills have to come along with strategic action-orientation and fire-in-the-belly.

The emerging key attributes of the modern global manager are as follows (Jain, 1994): “The task of the strategic manager is to strike a ‘fit’ between the various soft and hard components (of excellence) appropriate to the organizational values and need of the times. At this stage, he has to become a ‘specialist-entrepreneur-visionary-general manager.’ This role extends much beyond the requirements of a general manager envisaged by Harvard Professor, Kenneth Andrews, in 1968 (Andrews, 1987): “It calls for a humane perspective, holistic vision, artistic management skills, strong technocommercial knowledge base, and a positive orientation towards learning.” The two-year course is intended to make the MBA graduate a T-shaped knowledge worker—a specialist in some fields (the vertical part of letter T), and yet a generalist (the horizontal part that signifies a holistic capability to integrate various disparate information and situations to create a whole). These ‘processed’ students are expected to be skilled in critical thinking for an active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or a supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends’ (Dewey, 1966).

CREATING THE ‘KNOWEE’

The above concept of the specialist-entrepreneur could be upgraded; the new era (early part of the 21st century at least) would then belong to the mobile, multi-skilled, all-rounder, and independence-loving, knowledge-owning entrepreneurial employee (KNOWEE). By their very concept and nature, impact-making KNOWEEs are unconventional, unfettered, and unpredictable, to say the least (Jain, 1999). Further, organizations should start designing structures that can retain these highly energetic, knowledge-driven, and highly skilled employees since much learning and innovation-capacity of the organization rested in them (Jain, 1999). It is always going to be debatable how much of the envisaged skills and competences does an MBA education provide or what role do the case studies play as a training medium in creating the KNOWEEs.

The lives of some of the well-known leaders and statesmen suggest an extremely strong sense of history and foresight about the real picture. John Reed of Citicorp was known for insisting that his executives get the big picture. As Chairman and CEO, he demanded that business unit heads present their proposed strategies in no more than a few slides.¹ P&G is known for its one-page, A-4 size format for seeking top-management approvals. The big picture is most often a result of an articulated vision about the future that the organization wishes to create for itself and the necessary changes it wishes to bring about in its internal processes and influences for the prevailing and emerging environmental forces.

The most crucial element of management education is developing the student’s ability to critically evaluate information and ‘think.’ The student must acquire skills that enable him to form a view of the future (call it an element of foresight) and then be able to act upon it to profit from the coming opportunity. For management

educationists, throwing information in the classroom is not so important as to help students develop skills on how to apply knowledge to be able to think better. The children who have acquired proper thinking skills, according to Maxwell, will grow into adults ready to face the challenges of their lives. There is an added evidence that students who know how to think will also get along easier in all the other areas of life. On the other hand, adults who did not learn how to think on their own often find it hard to get along with others or have difficulty in holding down a job (Maxwell and Bishop, 1982).

There is a widespread feeling (helped much by the clichéd quote of Bernard Shaw, ‘Those who can’t, teach!’) that scholars and practitioners are two different mutually exclusive human species. Nothing can be farther from the truth than this in a knowledge economy paradigm as far as management education goes. Managers have to be learners/scholars; similarly, researchers and teachers have to have a sound understanding of the practising world to be relevant to the latter (otherwise we have the phrase ‘of academic interest only’). Military generals are increasingly being discussed as scholar-warriors! These soldiers not only have the larger picture of the battleground but also a deep analytical understanding of the interplay of human emotions and warfare technology. The management field too is veering towards the new breed of professional ‘scholar-performers’ that read and write books, contribute in journals, and teach apart from performing the main task of leading and managing organizations. Virtually, each decision-maker is now expected to possess critical thinking skills (defined as the mode of thinking — about any subject, content or problem — where the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them) (Paul, 1985). These are to supplement the intrinsic guts and courage required for implementing big decisions.

Having said all this, I am aware of an informed debate in the US and elsewhere about the real value and worthiness of the MBA degree. To quote from an interesting piece in the AOM Newsletter (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002): “Mintzberg and Lampel noted that of the four CEOs people most often named, when asked who had accomplished great things, none had a business school degree and two, Galvin of Motorola and Gates of Microsoft did not even finish college (Mintzberg and Lampel, 2001). In another article on failed corporations, 40 per cent of the CEOs possessed MBA degrees (Charan and Colvin, 1999)! The implication of these observations is that possessing an MBA degree neither guarantees business success nor prevents business failure. … Others also complain about the relevance of business school research: Richard R West, writing ten years ago as the Dean of New York University’s Graduate School of Business, applied the stinging terms ‘fuzzy, irrelevant, and pretentious’ to management school research.”

In the next section, we shall develop a framework to structure the situations that a student (manager) faces and the nature of choices available to him/her.

**Alternative Managerial Choices**

The case method attempts to simulate the real world conditions inside a ‘controlled’ environment of a classroom whereby a range of discussions would take place to understand the complexities of decision-making and their intended and unintended outcomes. The dialogue in the case study is iterative in the sense that the background note and the accompanying text provide the theoretical underpinnings to practice (Theory-into-Practice — ‘the TIP part’), while the practice experiences could help form new theory and conceptualizations (Practice-into-Theory—’the PIT part’). Unstructured situations with uncertain outcomes relating to practice require defter handling of the subject through inductive discovery processes and conceptualizations, compared to deductive teaching methods requiring single-best solutions through logical and rational approaches. Multiple outcomes because of multiple perspectives are always a possibility in the case of the former. Business management cases may fall into any of the four broad categories based on the complexity of problem and possible number of outcomes (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Framework for Problem-Outcome Linkages](image-url)
The typology is self-explanatory. In post-graduate MBA classes, one usually deals with cases that have complex and open-ended problems (quadrants 2 and 4). These may have a unique, ‘one-best’ solution (‘scientific’ based on computer simulation and complex algorithms) or multiple outcomes depending upon the value-system of the decision-makers. The effect of a decision in ‘judgmental’ or political cases may not even be obvious in the short-term. In extreme cases, such decisions may alter the course of history (e.g., wars, assassinations or strategic and political alliances). Irrespective of the nature of the problem or the number of outcomes, in each case, leadership skills, technical competence, talent, and seeking of relevant information are necessary inputs for an appropriate decision-making process.

Even in scientific-type cases, there would be an important ‘strategic’ managerial component. Management is much about implementation and action. A manager may possess all the knowledge about the latest theoretical developments on SQC and Six-Sigma methods but, for many companies, the crucial difference between competitiveness and bankruptcy often resolves the implementation difficulties of these technologies. Companies are known to have spent millions of dollars on computerization without getting adequate or measurable benefits from such efforts. This is also the reason why ‘management’ cases in exact sciences such as production and operations research, manufacturing and quality management, finance and accounting, etc., are so interesting.

At this point of time, it would be appropriate to delve into the scientific backdrop of learning and the manner in which human brain and memory function. This gives us another basis to develop an understanding of effective and lasting learning and teaching tools.

### SCIENCE OF MEMORY AND LEARNING

#### Two ‘Scientific’ Views on Holistic Learning

There is a scientific reason why the case study method is a superior pedagogy to teach courses and disciplines requiring intense interlinkages of the context with the existing situation or issue at hand. No two contexts are alike although the problems may be exactly similar. Two patients with similar symptoms may respond to altogether different medicines. Medicine, law, and management are disciplines where case studies are an effective medium of instruction and training. Given the number of solutions a problem may have, it is important to have the ability to narrow down to the manageable list rather than dither and let the opportunity go.

Eric Kandel, a Nobel Prize winner in Medicine in 2000, said, “If we continue making the kind of progress we are doing now, we will have drugs for age-related memory loss in five or ten years.” Timothy Tully, 48, a New York researcher and a founder of another biotech firm supports this view. These two pioneers have analysed in detail how the short-term and long-term memories work in human brain. The temporary strengthening of synaptic connections creates a short-term memory, e.g., when one hears a lecture or reads an article, the effect fades away within minutes or hours later. A synapse is the gap between the brain cells; to communicate with one another, the brain releases chemicals across the gap, much like the spark plug does in a mobike (Langreth, 2003).

Long-term memories are cemented in place for weeks or years with new proteins that reinforce the synapses connecting the cells. Each brain cell has the capacity to attach to 10,000 other brain cells. The well-trained brain is well-connected and trained to solve problems. Research in biotech shows that CREB—a naturally produced molecule (now produced in labs)—helps produce new proteins that etch permanent connections between the nerve cells. It is in these links that long-term memories are stored. But, more important than mere memorizing, apparently it is the strength of the learning connections between the nerves that probably distinguishes the chess grandmaster from the master. The research in this area presently is sketchy but, apparently, a combination of practice, genetic coding, and interest (involvement) trigger the understanding. A combination of ‘left and right brain capabilities’ produces new imaginations (learning and finding something common in two or more disparate events) resulting in creativity and innovations. A student in a case study may not remember the case details after some time (short-term memory), but if he/she has applied his/her mind and his/her various learnings from a variety of experiences, he/she would surely be able to come out with fresh conceptualizations and algorithmic frameworks which are likely to last long!

The second scientific view that treats human brain as a hologram is even more interesting in terms of our ability to paint, preserve, and retrieve new information, and encourage creativity by connecting seemingly unrelated pieces of information. The fundamental charac-
teristic of a hologram is that every part of a hologram contains all the information possessed by the whole. The ‘whole in every part’ nature of a hologram provides us with an entirely new way of understanding the organization and its order. This gives it the remarkable power to understand the physical phenomenon by synthesis of information, unlike the traditional Western thought that the best way to understand a phenomenon is to dissect it and study its respective parts. A hologram effectively shows us that many things in any given universe may not lend themselves to the ‘deductive’ approach. If we try to take apart something constructed holographically, we will not get the pieces of which it is made; we will only get smaller wholes in a 3-D format. For the teacher, the case method permits ‘n’ number of permutations and combinations perspectives to understand any single or composite phenomenon in the organizational context. The student can logically and creatively explore these manifestations in a case study.

INSTRUCTOR’S ROLE

In tune with the above observations, the instructor in a case study does not throw information at the class; instead, he actively participates in clearing (and creating!) the ‘ambiguities.’ It is quite possible that a case may be comprehensive enough to be used to teach several dimensions of management in multiple courses. Therefore, at times, the instructor’s role may require directing and channelizing the discussion (lest it would go adrift from the main theme). One of the main skills lies in bringing out newer perspectives to the case by encouraging students to share their personal experiences. He/she may allow two main groups holding opposite positions to ‘muscle it out.’ The class, therefore, not only hums with enjoyable action, but in the process, ‘tells’ the students about the importance of respecting others’ perspectives, the need for negotiations, consensus, and compromise, and importantly that no one solution is the ‘best’ solution for all times to come. It is the prevailing context and the perspective (value-system) of the decision-maker that determine the worthiness of decisions in a case. Referring back to Figure 1, in ‘judgmental’ type cases (e.g., strategy, OB, and marketing), the instructor himself must become a student since he/she may not have the right answer and all viable alternatives may be valid under different applied criteria. Even in ‘scientific’ type cases (e.g., optimization or routing problems), I have come across students suggesting highly elegant and concise ‘solutions’ that might be superior to those that the instructor had been teaching for a number of years.

Bringing Multiple Perspectives into Play

The instructor has an important role in bringing out multiple experiences sitting in the class. As mentioned earlier, an MBA class has students with diversified backgrounds. In one of the case studies on international joint venture between two fax machine companies, the students were required to understand the writing script and phonetic differences between the English and Japanese languages. The Chinese students in the class came up with the right translations to the Japanese symbols (therein I also learnt of the closeness of the two languages!).

Instructor as a Broker of Ideas

Given the complexity of any case situation and the variety of experiences and backgrounds of the students sitting in the class, the role of the instructor is much more comprehensive than just ‘taking’ a class. His/her role predominantly is of a ‘broker’ who integrates, shapes, and challenges disparate ideas presented in the session. In order to be a successful broker, the instructor ideally should have the width and depth of knowledge and experiences about the subject. Further, he/she should be able to spot the worth of a student’s idea in the class and be willing to explore it to the full. Creative use of black- and white-boards can help create a total assembly of viewpoints and ideas, leading to a superior, fun-filled discussion and learning.

The most interesting and enjoyable classes are the ones in which the students and the instructor bring in relevant examples from various sources including the sports arena, literature or different industries and experiences of different countries to explain (or argue) a contentious point in a case. For example, knowing well that cricket is a passion in India, the explanation of linkages between structure and strategy was best done by asking the students about Nasser Hussain’s (then England’s captain) field placements for a new bowler or by asking the difference between 4-4-2 vs. 4-3-3 structure on a football field and its effect, say, on the performance of Ronaldo and Zinedine at Real Madrid or Thierry Henry at Arsenal. The case method in this sense provides immense scope for the instructor to create and sustain the students’ interest in a management course.
The role as a broker begins with the thought of structuring a course, designing a logical flow of sessions, making a choice of the pedagogy, cases, and reading texts, and assessing the students' learning. Finally, the instructors should keep Shapiro's useful advice at the back of their minds (Shapiro, 1985): “Have the students accept and maintain ownership of the discussion. The discussion must be student-driven. If the teacher takes the responsibility for ownership of the class, the students can collectively and individually avoid their responsibility for maintaining the quality of the discussion and the process will degenerate to the instructor’s lecturing about the case.”

After all, as instructors, we need to continuously remind ourselves: what business are we in and what shall satisfy us the most?

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FURTHER READINGS


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