

## ***EVALUATING STUDENTS WORKING ON CASE STUDIES IN MANAGEMENT ONLINE COURSES: A STUDY ON A FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN STUDENTS SAMPLE***

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**Summary:** Teaching and learning styles are, by their very nature, changing. In recent years there has been a noticeable move from lecture-based activities towards more student-centered activities. Among these activities are case studies. They provide an opportunity for the development of key skills such as communication, group working and problem solving. They enable students to acquire more individual study skills and more independence in information gathering and analysis. They attract attention to the importance of time management in order to be able to come up with all the requested deliverables at the end of the study. Written and oral presentation skills represent an important benefit of using case studies. Finally, this approach increases the students' enjoyment of the topic and hence their desire to learn. But, what happens when case studies are used in e-learning?

In a previous work, the author has undergone a study on executive francophone African adult learners enrolled for a Master's degree in Management at Senghor University<sup>1</sup> in Alexandria, Egypt within a Total Quality Management course that was originally offered in class. The course content was adapted for e-learning purposes enabling a lot of virtual collaborative work within the scope of an AUF<sup>2</sup> project. In our previous experiment several student/learner attitudes were observed both in class and online when working on case studies. These included frequency of asking questions in a group, frequency of asking questions by a certain member of a group, implication of all the members of the group, social interaction and conflict among the group members. The overall results showed that these students' attitudes were better in the virtual setting. However, questions remained unanswered. *Did this positive attitude help learners better achieve the learning objectives? Did this help improving the output of the educational system?* Would the same student be better graded in a virtual setting compared to an in-class setting? Does the grading/evaluation approach change according to the setting? Does the grading/evaluation approach clearly reflect skills acquired in both settings? To what extent should performance in case studies affect the global student evaluation?

In this work, a grading grid is proposed to be used with the case study exercise. The grid addresses all skills that the student/learner working on the case should prove mastering. A precise breakdown of skills, competencies and knowledge that should be checked is provided in order to remove subjectivity as it is sometimes the case in grading case studies. The use of this grid enabled answering the questions above. In general, the virtual setting enabled better achievement of the learning objectives. The study also confirmed that the case studies style of work may not be suited to everyone. Some students may work more efficiently in a formal and time-constrained setting, such as an examination, and although this may not be the better mode of learning, it is one to which they have become thoroughly accustomed to at school. Whether case studies in e-learning suit the students learning styles or not, our objective is to help students develop a wide range of skills. In order to solve this problem, grading, evaluation, judgment of the learners using this grid is done only in terms of the case study on hand. No generalizations as to the learners overall performance are done. Complementary evaluations are used to double-check the skills acquisition for some students when it was not clear in the case study exercise. Finally an overall formula for global evaluation of the students of the course involving all types of exercises is proposed. The formula suggests a certain weight attributed to the case studies in the overall evaluation.

**Keywords:** e-learning, management education, case studies, collaborative work, evaluation, grading

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### **I. Introduction**

Using case studies in management education is an increasing practice. The case study method originated in the latter half of the nineteenth century at Harvard Law School and was adopted by Harvard Business School in the

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early twentieth century (Copeland, 1954). The rationale for using the case study method in management education is that it is the most practical way of providing students with a variety of management problems to which they apply the knowledge and skills they are acquiring in their studies (Sawyer, Tomlinson and Maple, 2000). It allows the selection of problems and decision-making scenarios, and the level of complexity, in a controlled environment and in a relatively short period of time. Mistakes made in analysis or the choice of action recommended have no repercussions for any organization, thereby allowing students to practice analysis and decision-making without fear of failure and all that it might entail. In short, cases pose exactly the sort of situations students are likely to encounter in their managerial roles (Orpen, 2000). Jennings (1996) summarizes some frequently cited learning objectives associated with the case study method. Cases can be used to acquire knowledge, confront the complexity of specific situations, develop analysis and synthesis and relate theory to practice. They help transfer knowledge from the classroom to managerial practice; develop interpersonal skills; illustrate particular points, issues or managerial principles; develop judgment, wisdom, self-analysis, attitudes, confidence and responsibility; enliven teaching, and bring realism into instructional settings. In addition, according to Cameron (1999), cases provide a useful basis for assessment, develop group-working skills and 'highlight tacit assumptions about organizations'. The case study approach also 'offers a vehicle for constructive change', and 'helps unlearn skilled incompetence', as well as enhancing 'student development of verbal and written communication skills' (Osigweh, 1989). Harrison-Walker (2000) argues that students are more likely to internalize concepts used to solve real-world marketing situations.

However, the benefits and merits of the case study method are not entirely unchallenged. Weil *et al.* (2001) note that the literature 'is primarily descriptive, with no empirical evidence on the use or effectiveness of the method'. Krebar (2001) supports this observation, arguing that the purported improvements in educational outcomes are not underpinned by research. Argyris (1980) highlights a number of discrepancies between

the learning theory espoused by faculty members and their actions, implying a gap between the stated value of using the case study method and the actual use of it. Some of the criticism appears to be contradictory, suggesting inadequate research evidence. Osigweh (1989), for instance, states that the case study approach makes the learning process less teacher-centered. However, Forman and Rymer (1999) contend that in practice it is too teacher-centered, with the teacher often acting as a figure 'who descends from the heavens to bestow wisdom on mere mortals in the case'. They argue that teachers can influence analysis by the type of questions and guidance given, channeling discussion towards a particular answer, thus invalidating the 'no right answer' claim. In short, the teacher adopts the role of a conductor or controller. Other shortcomings of the case study method include a focus on the past and static situations, ignoring the dynamic processes of management (Osigweh 1989, Stonham 1995).

Like the case of scholars, students also have a certain perception of the case studies method. Brennan and Ahmad (2005) studied a sample of 288 final-year undergraduate students at two UK higher education institutions to uncover their views about the case study method. They found evidence of marked differences in attitude towards case studies between students with different entry qualifications and with different ethnic backgrounds. What is important to investigate in this regard is whether or not the case studies approach better enable the attainment of the different cognitive learning objectives as compared to other approaches.

Another factor that influences performance and assimilation in learning is the use of multimedia. O'Connell, McCarthy, and Hall (2004) explored the impact of teaching a printed leadership case study with and without the appearance of the CEO in class by video or in person. Their investigation showed, via qualitative and quantitative means, that the leader's presence, even through video, significantly affects student engagement and can substantially enhance impressions of leadership effectiveness. Computers and the internet offer the possibility of using the different multimedia tools to clarify parts of

the case study. Examples are links to websites of the companies being studied. Videos and images providing details on location, markets, products and clients motivate students and equips them with information that helps them better work on the case. In addition, having the possibility to work directly on the computer, enables on the spot gathering of information, saving this information and rapidly processing it with available software. A possible example is the use of statistics software. On the other hand, computers and internet are a basic component of on-line educational systems that are and will be continuously growing.

This paper builds on a previous work where learners' attitudes were observed both in class and online when working on case studies. These included frequency of asking questions in a group, frequency of asking questions by a certain member of a group, implication of all the members of the group, social interaction and conflict among the group members. The overall results showed that these students' attitudes were better in the virtual setting. But, did this positive attitude help learners better achieve the learning objectives. We propose an evaluation grid to help assess the student's performance. We use the grid to evaluate the performance of an African students sample, employing case studies and using multimedia tools and virtual communication in an online setting. Section 2 elaborates on special features of the online educational context. Section 3 presents attitudes of students working on case studies online. Section 4 presents the evaluation grid and results revealed and we conclude in section 5.

## **II. Special features of the online educational context**

Parallel to the increasing use of the case studies approach, the use of on line educational tools in management as well as in other fields is continuing to grow. In fact, the development of information and communication technologies gave rise to a number of virtual realities involving education and other activities. Virtual work teams, on-line meetings are among the examples. In fact, several researches working on the impact of technology of the social performance have studied some of these realities. Examples of

these are virtual product development teams. Preachers for the use of collaborative technologies in the work environment have been encountered by contrary opinions stating that it is not always productive and that the context can give rise to a lot of social misalignments. Preachers of the importance of the use of information and communication technology in education are in a luckier situation. Countercurrents are not yet that strong. Maybe this is due to the fact that online learning solutions are not yet widely used as is the case for traditional learning settings. We believe that every learning context has its special features, advantages and disadvantages that cannot be generalized to all types of learning activities. This motivated our research on the case study method. We wanted to check whether the use of case studies in the online context, possessing certain characteristics, better enable the attainment of learning objectives.

For case studies, involving teamwork, special features of the online context include a higher possibility of social misalignments, documented communication, varying levels of creativity and collaboration depending on the adaptation of the learning style of the participant to the virtual setting. The online setting also supposes a higher level of mastering the computer and internet tools by the student and the accessibility to good computers and internet connections.

## **III. Attitudes of students working on case studies online**

El Khayat and Shaker (2006), explored the utility of offering the case studies component of a Total Quality Management course on line. The course is offered as a part of masters in management program in Senghor University. The sample included a number of students who already followed the course in class. Attitudes observed included and were not limited to: frequency of asking questions in a group, frequency of asking questions by a certain member of a group, implication of all the members of the group, social interaction and conflict among the group members. The number of these students was 26.

The actions observed were asking questions within a group, asking questions by a certain member within a group, implication of group members, high social interaction and finally conflict among group members. For the first action, the frequency of asking questions in a group was checked. Questions for clarification were addressed to either other members of the group or to the instructor or the tutor. In the second action, it was monitored whether a certain member in a group persisted in asking questions to his/her colleagues, to the instructor or the tutor in search for clarification in both the class as well as the virtual setting. The number of persisting members in both settings was measured. The third action monitored served in checking whether the virtual setting had an impact on the student implication. Implication of a student was

verified in terms the relative frequency of intervention in the group to contribute something and his/her relative work load. Social interaction was checked through whether or not students enjoyed the relation developed around the case. This was monitored through references they made in class to some extra meetings. In the distant learning case, the archived chat was very indicative on the degree of social interaction. Conflict was the final action monitored. In the class case it was evident through direct observation and in the online case it was reflected in complete silence of a certain member after a situation of disagreement on something. The overall results were in favor of using the case study method in a virtual setting.

Action observed	Measured	Virtual setting	Class setting
Frequency of asking questions in a group	Average number of clarifying questions asked per group	4	10
Frequency of asking questions by a certain member of a group	Number of persisting members in all the groups	3	5
Implication of all members of the group	Number of fully implicated members in all the groups	20 out of 26	16 out of 26
High social interaction	Number of highly interacting members in all the groups	10 out of 26	18 out of 26
Conflict among the group members	Number of conflicts identified	7 conflicts	7 conflicts

**Table 1. Actions observed in class and online**

Some explanations for these results follow. Regarding the first action, frequency of asking questions in a group, students would not continue to ask and interrupt in a virtual setting as they might do in class. They will take the time to think and formulate the proper question before they send it to their colleagues meeting virtually or to their tutor. Frequency of asking questions by a certain member of a group was observed to be less in the case of the virtual setting for similar reasons. The presence of a

member of a group physically apart from his colleagues helped develop autonomy in dealing with the whole experience. The students came up with questions on second thoughts. As for the implication, this was also better in the online setting. The documented communication and the fact that every contribution is deposited on the platform by the student who did the work motivated students to take part in the process. Even if free-riding would have seemed appealing for

some, they were afraid to do it so that it does not reflect negatively on the grading. Social interaction was higher in the class setting. Some on the campus activities, such as meals and sports, helped relations grow closer. Only 7 conflicts were identified in both cases. In the online setting these were sometimes due to technical problems that created misunderstandings. In the class setting, they were all due to some negative attitudes. In spite of having the same number of conflicts in both settings, the online case is better on this aspect. Conflicts sometimes resulted accidentally with no negative attitudes at all. As it is clear in the results, social interaction seemed to be the factor that performed poorly in the online setting. Does this result mean that cognitive learning objectives were better achieved? The proposal of an evaluation methodology was necessary to answer this question.

#### **IV. Evaluation of students working on case studies online**

The learning objectives of using case studies can sometimes be assessed in the short term and other times in the long term. Jennings (1996) summarizes some frequently cited learning objectives associated with the case study method. Cases can be used to acquire knowledge, confront the complexity of specific situations, develop analysis and synthesis and relate theory to practice. They help transfer knowledge from the classroom to managerial practice; develop interpersonal skills; illustrate particular points, issues or managerial principles; develop judgment, wisdom, self-analysis, attitudes, confidence and responsibility; enliven teaching, and bring realism into instructional settings. If we refer to objectives cited by Jennings (1996), it becomes difficult to prove after the use of the case study method that a student has developed wisdom, confidence and responsibility. To be able to assess the attainment of such qualities, students should be known in advance and the course duration should be relatively long. In this work, we prefer to refer to Bloom's taxonomy (1956) of learning objectives that seems more precise and that enables the assessment of the attainment of the learning objectives on the short term. In the cognitive

domain, Bloom's taxonomy identifies 6 levels of learning objectives that can be assessed in an educational exercise. Bloom's taxonomy is easily understood and is probably the most widely applied one in use today. The cognitive domain involves knowledge and the development of intellectual skills. This includes the recall or recognition of specific facts, procedural patterns, and concepts that serve in the development of intellectual abilities and skills. There are six major categories, which are listed in order below, starting from the simplest behavior to the most complex. The categories can be thought of as degrees of difficulties. That is, the first one must be mastered before the next one can take place. The 6 categories are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. To acquire knowledge, the learner has to be able to recall data or information. Comprehension implies understanding the meaning, translation, interpolation, and interpretation of instructions and problems and eventually stating a problem in one's own words. In application, the learner uses a concept or a method in a new situation or makes an unprompted use of an abstraction. The learner also applies what was learned in the classroom into novel situations in the work place. Analysis requires separation of material or concepts into component parts so that its organizational structure may be understood. It is a level that distinguishes between facts and inferences. In synthesis, learners build a structure or a pattern from diverse elements. They put parts together to form a whole, with emphasis on creating a new meaning or structure. Evaluation is the most complex level and it involves making judgments about the value of ideas or materials. Probably this level corresponds, the most, to case studies where students propose a supposedly evaluated solution to the problem the case study presents. However, in the case studies, students actually go through the 6 different levels in order to finally arrive to the solution's proposal level where they implicitly or explicitly evaluated the solution they are proposing.

Corresponding to each level of objectives there is an appropriate way for evaluation which is used. To assess knowledge, multiple choice questions are used. With the knowledge level, multiple choice questions are often used.

Comprehension calls for classical questions. Exercises are used with the application level. Analysis requires a problem to work on and synthesis is evaluated relative to certain topic. Finally personal production is used at the evaluation level. In case studies, the evaluation learning objective assumes that the 5 other learning objectives have been attained. However, case studies propose another difficulty. At the level of knowledge, the students are not asked to state relevant knowledge to the case but they have to come up on their own with the relevant pieces of information. In comprehension, they are not directed to parts of the text or given data needing a special attention to be properly understood. It is the student's decision to dig further and to orient efforts in order to achieve the best understanding of the case. Application implies a decision on the appropriate methods to apply, ways of application, proposal of some hypothesis and the like. Analysis is used with information provided in the case in order to provide a diagnosis and with the results of the application of some methods and tools. At the synthesis level, the different building blocks of the solution to be proposed come together to a certain shape that suggests a certain solution

scenario. These different learning objectives attract our attention to 2 important characteristics of the successful candidate working on a case study. The first is choice: the ability to choose among appropriate pieces of information as well as appropriate tools. The second is responsibility: responsibility of the choice and ability to foresee the development of the exercise based on the choices and decisions made. In addition to these two characteristics: solidity and validity of the solution, teamwork and creativity and originality.

Without loss of generality, one is inclined to say that the use of case studies allows the evaluation of the attainment of all levels of the learning objectives, provided that the case study presents the different learning objectives almost equally. It also allows the assessment of the attainment of other objectives as presented earlier. The only problem is about the evaluator's method and expectations in evaluating the students. Students working on case studies produce unconstrained texts that open doors to subjectivity while grading. The following grid is proposed in light of the previous discussion.

Learning objective attained		Different features proving attainment				Total
Objectives relevant to Bloom's Taxonomy	Knowledge	Naming different pieces of knowledge appropriately	Referring to similar knowledge or complementary information	Advancing clear definitions when needed	Ability to label actions and phenomena according to types and categories	
	Comprehension	Understanding the different elements presented in the case	Understanding the concepts referred to in the methods applied	Understanding concepts proposed in the solution	Understanding all elements highlighted in the final report	
	Application	Applying the proper method	Applying the method on the proper data	Advancing appropriate hypothesis when necessary	Applying a novel method or approach	

	Analysis	Separating input data	Analyzing elements of the case enabling diagnosis	Analysis of the output of the application of some methods	Comparing different results	
	Synthesis	Integration of the different information in the case	Integration of different components of the solution	Integration of needed resources	Planning the different implementation phases of a solution	
	Evaluation	Evaluation of the gravity of the problem	Evaluating the choice of the methods used	Evaluating the quality/potential impact of the solution	Evaluating the resources needed to implement	
Other objectives	Teamwork	Number of exchanges among the team	Absence of conflicts	Degree of cohesiveness	Respect of equal loads	
	Originality/creativity	Originality in the choice of tools and methods applied	Originality in the solution proposed	Creativity in the process (work division, responsibilities)	Number of creative ideas and innovations proposed	
	Quality of presentation	Structure of the presentation	Coverage of all parts needed	Degree of elaboration	Quality of the document delivered (language, layout, etc...)	
	Solution validity and solidity	Number of scenarios proposed	Possibility of application in a real setting	Cost of the solution	Social acceptance	
Total						

What we named as other objectives in the grid are considered necessary skills that help the students achieve the learning objectives and that also represent necessary skills to the adult learner. These skills are necessary for a successful professional life. Although skills

acquired are not necessarily quantitative, all components of the grid are reduced to a quantitative scale to allow simplicity in interpretation. We presume that the precise breakdown provided allows a clear evaluation



of the students. All evaluated items are relative to the case study at hand.

Preliminary usage of the grid showed better performance for students working on the case studies in the virtual setting. Further testing will be planned for. Since case studies address all the learning objectives, they are attributed the weight 40% in the overall global evaluation. Percentages of the local evaluations relative to the 6 learning objectives levels are 10% each. This enables double-checking the attainment of the different learning objectives in cases where learning levels are evaluated separately and when they are collectively evaluated in the case studies.

## V. Conclusion

In this paper, we presented a grid to be used in evaluating case studies offered within the scope of a total quality management course. In a previous study on a francophone African students sample using the case studies method in an online setting, a number of actions were observed. The actions observed were basically: frequency of asking questions in a group, frequency of asking questions by a certain member of a group, implication of all the members of the group, social interaction and conflict among the group members. Results showed a better attitude in the online setting. However, the grid was used in order to assess whether this positive attitude was revealing of more success of the educational exercise. The evaluation grid was used in order to evaluate the work of the students in both the online as well as the class setting in a way to eliminate subjectivity and to determine whether the online setting enabled better achievement of the learning objectives. In fact, the positive attitude contributed to a better achievement of the learning objectives as was confirmed by the evaluation grid. In addition, the online setting suits the executive learners since they are busy and cannot sacrifice a lot of time in which they have to be physically present at the university.

Future research includes the development of more online exercises for the same course and the corresponding evaluation methods.

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