Risky Business: Case Study Pedagogy and Business Communication

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Risky Business: Case Study Pedagogy and Business Communication

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ABSTRACT

When Harvard College built their business school curriculum around case studies and discussion-based classrooms in the early 1900s, it created a radical shift in business school pedagogy throughout the nation due to its ability to prepare students for careers in industry. As case study pedagogy spread to other fields throughout the 20th century, such as medical education and the sciences, these fields extended Harvard’s approach in order to create highly effective, field-specific pedagogies. However, business communication is yet to develop their own field-specific approach to case study pedagogy that meets the unique needs of our educators and students. I argue that business communication’s current approach to case study pedagogy is locked in a 20th-century mindset. By developing a taxonomy of case studies, building new composition and distribution processes, reexamining our use of discussion-bases classroom practices, and reimagining new roles for readers and writers, business communication can rehabilitate this pragmatic pedagogical tradition for the 21st-century.
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CHAPTER ONE

THE GENRE SYSTEM OF CASE STUDY PEDAGOGY

This project examines the use of case study pedagogy for teaching business communication at American collegiate institutions. Case study pedagogy, as I am using it in this dissertation, includes the wider processes of composing, theorizing, and using case studies for educational purposes (both research cases and teaching cases). In this way, case study pedagogy refers to more than just the actual case study itself that students receive as an electronic or hard copy document. Instead, it refers to the pedagogical justification of using cases in the classroom; the complex taxonomies of different cases; the processes of researching and composing cases; the method of using them in the classroom; and the training resources provided to teachers who want to employ case studies.

However, this project has a second goal that is just as important as the first. By examining the use of case study pedagogy in the teaching of business communication, I am arguing that the educators who teach business communication courses in higher education constitute a sub-field of professional and technical communication known as business communication. As Matthew
Sharp and Eva Brumberger’s (2013) recent audit of business communication curricula has shown, 76% of all business communication courses are taught in business schools by a range of contingent, full-time, and tenure-track faculty. These findings extend John D. Beard’s (1993) research 20 years prior that 61% of all business communication courses were taught in business schools, showing that this course curriculum is increasingly being housed in business schools. This is important for us to recognize because business schools have a long pedagogical lineage that correlates the is coterminous with the very founding of business schools: case study pedagogy.

Juxtaposed against this upward-sloping trend of teaching business communication in schools of business, surveys about faculty make up show that this course curriculum is being taught by a diverse group of instructors from different disciplines such as education, communication, English, and management (Reinsch Jr, 1996). When we look at data from the Association for Business Communication, we see that, of 1,300 members, 29% of instructors received their advanced degrees in education, 26% in English, 15% in Communication, 12% in Business Administration (Reinsch Jr, 1996). As a result of this faculty diversity, business communication, as a course, has neither a uniform pedagogical tradition or a uniform textbook tradition (Ober, 1987). As a way to rectify this diversity in our theoretical approaches and our curriculum
sources for teaching business communication, I am suggesting that case study pedagogy might be a foundational pedagogical approach that distinguishes business communication from its parent discipline of professional and technical communication. However, in order to establish this sub-field of business communication around case study pedagogy, the use of case studies in business communication needs to be rethought in order to more accurately meet the needs of our educators and our students.

**Why Business Communication Needs a New Approach to Case Study Pedagogy.**

In American higher education, the use of case study pedagogy is most often associated with Harvard University—specifically, Harvard Business School (HBS). Building on a series of pedagogical experiments started at Harvard Law School (HLS) in 1870, HBS officially named and instituted their own unique approach to case studies in 1921 (Garvin, 2003). The *case method*, HBS’s specific type of case study that shares the historical narrative of a real company, and the *Socratic method*, a specific approach to a question-and-answer style discussion classroom, became the model by which other educational fields outside of business began developing their own approach to case study pedagogy in the 20th century, including business communication.
Now, 95 years after the official declaration of this new pedagogical method, case study pedagogy exists inside of a much different economic and industrial reality than it did in the early 1900s. And although our economic and industrial realities have changed, business communication’s approach to case study pedagogy has not. This is a problem in two ways. First, the case study can be an effective tool for helping students understand complexity inside of particular, situated contexts (Simons, 1996). As many pedagogues have noted, case studies are tools for developing a student’s capacity for judgment and response in the face of situations with no correct answers (Gragg, 1954). By not altering, or updating our approach to case study pedagogy, this once-effective tool is now becoming ineffective and obsolete.

Second, the case study is becoming increasingly important to a variety of different industries, and it is often the primary interview method of choice by companies (Flynn, n.d.). Not only is it a prime way to interview potential candidates and see their logical thought process in action, it is also an increasingly common tool companies use to highlight their own success with clients. For instance, Red Hat, one of the fastest growing information technology security firms in the United States, employs an entire division of content strategists who write case studies about their customers’ success with using Red Hat enterprise systems (Red Hat, Inc, 2016). These case studies highlight how
they identified a company’s needs, creatively solved for those needs, and how
the outcome can be measured or rated as successful. Red Hat is not alone in this
reliance on case studies as vehicles to communicate a narrative of their
company’s work; it is an ever-increasing common form of corporate narrative.

Because of these reasons, I claim that it is imperative that business
communication rethink our approach to this pedagogy in order to meet the
needs of our students in a 21st-century workforce. To lay the groundwork for its
contemporary relevance, I unpack the economic and educational exigencies that
led HBS to develop their case method and Socratic method approach to teaching
business. By designing this narrative of the economic and educational exigencies
of the early 1900s, my goal is to show how we might also think about our current
economic and educational urgencies that spawn the need for a 21st-century
approach to one of the most radical educational innovations of the 20th century:

case study pedagogy, which includes the wider processes of composing,
theorizing, and using case studies for educational purposes (both research cases
and teaching cases) in business communication.

Why HBS Developed a Case Study Pedagogy

HBS’s case method and Socratic method were developed as an explicit
response to the economic and cultural changes of the late 19th and early 20th
centuries. As industry changed so rapidly during this period, education, quality
of life, and our national economy had to adapt as well. In one of the earliest arguments for case study pedagogy at Harvard, Arthur Stone Dewing (1954) wrote that, by the 1900s, business administration is among the most complex facets of contemporary human existence, and as such, it demanded a new mode of instruction. In his work, Dewing (1954) anecdotally cited an annual address from the president of the American Philosophical Association who claimed that the science of finance had grown vastly distant from the certainty and predictability associated with the natural sciences. Our understanding of the complexity of finance is, “at best, no further along than Thales trying to deduce order out of the movements of the heavenly bodies without any conception of celestial mechanics,” the president claimed, and, “such is the problem of the discovery of truth underlying human action” (Dewing, 1954, p. 3).

With all of the complex economic change of transitioning a nation out of agrarianism and into industrialization, Dewing claimed that Harvard needed to not teach “truths,” but rather, “teach men to think in the presence of new situations” (1954, p. 3). This emphasis on the complexity of modern business, the contingency of truth, and the need for decision-making skills is a common refrain among Harvard faculty. As HBS’s faculty members and administrators saw it, modern-day business leaders needed to be incredibly interdisciplinary in their knowledge base so that they could artfully make decisions in the face of
uncertainty. However, what were the factors contributing to this view of modernity as so vastly complex and contingent than previous decades? Based upon an analysis of several national reports about the state of education penned during the first half of the 20th century, we can identify three main categories of change that were so crucial: the larger national economic infrastructure, the growth of new industries, and educational reform.

The America of 1881, when Joseph Wharton founded the first undergraduate business school, was a vastly different economic landscape from the one 27 years later when the AACSB was formed in 1916. In Bossard and Dewhurst’s (1931) national study of business school education, the authors noted that, at Wharton’s founding, agriculture was still the dominant industry for much of the population. Manufacturing and mining were beginning to make rapid innovations after the Civil War, but as the authors have reminded us, America’s “productive energies were still devoted largely to the primary exploitation and development of vast areas of fertile land and varied and abundant resources. We were still developing the country,” they noted (Bossard & Dewhurst, 1931, p. 3). What followed this period of Reconstruction was six decades of rapid economic expansion that saw the creation of the modern office, two world wars, and the creation of widespread household disposable income. As the manufacturing sector grew and foreign trade increased, family incomes
doubled during those 60 years (Bossard & Dewhurst, 1931). Bank clearings outside of New York City\textsuperscript{1} also rose 700%, and there was a 300% gain in foreign trade (Bossard & Dewhurst, 1931). While these levels of production skyrocketed, consumption did as well. Brossard and Dewhurst (1931) are quick to praise the fact that population growth had slowed to 60% while the consumption of electricity soared 2500%. To put these numbers in modern correlatives, The US Department of Energy (2015) reports only a 12% increase in peak electricity consumption between 2001 and 2015, when our modern “technologic revolution” saw the largest spike in mobile phone, computer, and personal electronic device usage.

The positive effect of two world wars on the US economy can hardly be overemphasized here, as well. During the First World War, America transitioned from primarily producing tobacco, cotton and wheat to producing materials of war—essentially becoming the “Arsenal of Democracy,” as one AACSB report pens it (Dirkson & Lockley, 1966, p. 6). This changing economic landscape had serious impacts on the development of the modern office, in particular. Dirkson and Lockley describe how the workplace had evolved since Wharton opened its doors:

\textsuperscript{1} The exclusion of New York City figures means that these numbers are not inflated values due to stock exchange transactions.
few offices had typewriters or female secretaries [in the late 1800s]. Elevators in office buildings were new and very few were installed. It is clear that the young man entering business in this period needed only the simplest skills. A little bookkeeping, some commercial geography, knowledge of interest tables, the ability to write a legible hand, and knowledge of spelling would have constituted quite a competitive advantage. These skills could have been taught without a long academic tradition, and doubtless were. Certainly, they were only a part of a curriculum that would have included history, rhetoric, literature, and a fair introduction to the classics and mathematics. (1966, p. 3)

The American workplace was poised at a crucial moment of technologic change, caught between pen-and-paper letter writing and the coming secretarial revolution. Although Remington had already introduced the first commercial typewriter in 1865, it was slow to gain popularity due to its high cost and the need for typing training. Gleaning some insight from Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, published in 1936, without a secretarial class who could take over the written communication tasks of administrators, many business managers spent their time hand-writing letters—sometimes as many as 40 a day if you were the Rockefeller’s or J.P. Morgan’s of the world. However, within 20 years, many larger offices would be filled with a clerical and secretarial
team working on typewriters and adding machines, as seen in Figure 1.1 below (Partial View of Home Office, Victory Life Insurance Co., Chicago, Ill., 1924).

And as the one-manager corporate model gave way to more complex organizational structures, the modern office and its changing workforce began to become a central aspect of America’s economic infrastructure.

Figure 1.1: Postcard of a mid-size Chicago insurance firm with sixteen branches in twelve states.

All of the economic and technologic change that these national reports are discussing also required American educators to rethink the current educational models in place at the time. Writing in 1941, Edward Knepper believed that the
rise of business education in the early 1900s could not be told without mentioning the advent of high schools. After presenting his audience with a similar narrative of technologic and industrial progress as we saw above, Knepper (1941) explained that the advent of high school education from 1890-1910 created 7,700 public high schools, nation-wide. This expansion generated a massive amount of wealth for school districts, increasing public education land holdings from $49 million to $220 million\(^2\) during those years (Knepper, 1941). Many citizens saw these new high schools as a perfect substitute for college, which may be a reason why the rate of college matriculation stalled during this time while public school enrollment grew 500% (Knepper, 1941).

The creation of high schools also required both more physical classroom space and a new curriculum to accommodate the influx of student bodies. As we might expect, there was not uniformed agreement among the districts about what should be taught in high schools. School administrators were weary of the newly burgeoning *vocational education* movement because they saw it as a threat to a traditional liberal education. Administrators also saw the need to distinguish themselves from private for-profit institutions, such as private business schools.

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\(^2\) Education funding, during this time period, was concentrated on the local governmental level (as opposed to state and federal) at an average of 80% local sources of revenue.
that taught skills-based training programs³ (Knepper, 1941). Because most administrators still believed in a classical education that gave “good mental training,” as opposed to teaching skills-based or vocational curriculum, this may be a reason why private business schools experienced a small enrollment boom in the early 1900s (Knepper, 1941, p. 107).

While the tension between liberal arts models and vocational education was underway, the pedagogical work of two famed German scholars began to change the physical landscape of the classroom. Friedrich Froebel, who coined the term *kindergarten*, and Johann Friedrich Herbart, the founder of pedagogy as an academic discipline, gained significant ground in America during the late 1800s for their recognition of active learning and the centrality of engaging students’ interests in the classroom (Knepper, 1941). Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarty (1998) described pedagogical theorists as often falling between two poles during this time period: those who, like Herbart and Froebel, acknowledged the centrality of engaging student interest for successful teaching, and those who, like Wendell Harris, argued that successful teaching relied on students demonstrating effort—whether or not it engaged their interests. The Herbartians introduced a classroom that was student-centered and recognized each student as possessing unique capacities and necessitating different learning

³ At the time, these private business schools mostly taught typewriting skills, grammar, and letter writing skills.
styles. The followers of Harris, on the other hand, had a strong authoritarian pedagogy that often induced students to work by the use of punishment and threat (Fishman & McCarty, 1998).

As a contemporary of Herbart and Harris, John Dewey referred to these two movements as “soft” and “hard” pedagogies, respectively. Dewey critiqued the Herbartians of “sugarcoating” education by pandering to students’ most basic desires (Fishman & McCarty, 1998, p. 36). However, he equally lambasted followers of Harris for creating a “penitentiary” style of teaching, explaining that the most successful pedagogical theory recognizes that effort and interest are not binary and conflicting terms (Fishman & McCarty, 1998, p. 36). Both of these movements failed to recognize that students’ interests already overlap with educational subject matter, claimed Dewey, and it is the educator’s job to figure out how to foster these intrinsic desires. Interest fades, he recognized, and thwarted effort leads to sour grapes; so for interest and effort to work productively, “interest must be gratified slowly enough and with sufficient challenge that it has an opportunity to grow, so that our effort can turn up fresh, related materials to maintain and expand it” (Fishman & McCarty, 1998, p. 37).

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4 This pedagogical critique continues to play out in our current historical moment where the debate between edutainment and rote skill-and-drill memorization occupies the majority of educational policy debate.
Dewey’s insights on pedagogy were heavily referenced by Harvard faculty as the explicit theoretical underpinnings for the development of the case method.

**What the Story of HBS Means for Business Communication Today**

This litany of economic, industrial and educational changes during the early 1900s is more than just a helpful historical explanation of the exigencies that spawned HBS’s case study pedagogy. This historical narrative offers us two key topics we might explore about our own historical moment when asking how we might alter our pedagogical approach to case-based education: changes in industry and the national economic infrastructure, and educational reform.

**Changes in industry and national economic infrastructure.**

First, this historical narrative shows us that the field of business administration was formed in response to the *perceived coming needs of industry*—not a crisis of education. In other words, there was not an academic outcry for the institution to establish schools of business so that they could better meet the needs of their student body. Nor was there an industry outcry for top-tier academic institutions to begin providing business education. Business, as an *academic* discipline, was scoffed at by both the professorial class and industry leaders in the early 1900s because business was seen as a *vocational* study best learned through apprenticeship (Garvin, 2003). What happened instead was a bit more radical: Wharton, Harvard, and other early institutions all recognized that
market conditions were changing, even if the demand was not fully present. Industry leaders were expressing their need for better-trained businesspersons, but they could not look far enough down the horizon to see that business would outgrow its status as a vocational course in typing and handwriting and become a full-fledged academic discipline. By reading the coming market conditions and creating an academic degree to match a future workforce demand, these early business schools boldly created their own conditions of possibility.

New industry and unprecedented wealth creation meant a new era of American economics, and if they wanted to start a school of business, educators first needed to diagnose their historical moment, quickly develop a curriculum, and establish the best pedagogy for delivering that information. Summarizing these exigencies and the difficulty of this task in better detail, Arthur Stone Dewing reflected that:

This economic theory [needed to be] wrought out of *American industrial conditions* and not represent merely re-echoes of an economic theory based on the agricultural England of the middle nineteenth century. (1954, p. 4; emphasis mine)

According to Dewing, the most we could hope to do in this new American economics is to move away from classical free market economics and to acknowledge the infinite complexity of modern business. HBS’s approach to case
study pedagogy, then, might be read as the educational response to this new
global economics.

Much like the industrial and economic change during the early 1900s, I
argue that business communication is standing face-to-face with a looming mass
economic and industrial shift. This economic shift is much different from the
perennial “crisis of the humanities” that higher education scholars continually
decry. Instead, this shift concerns the new economic realities of a growing
freelance economy in the United States. As Forbes (Wald, 2014) and PBS (Solman,
2015) have reported, between 20 to 40 percent of the United States workforce is
employed as freelance workers—and this number is expected to rise dramatically
over the next 10 years. Freelance labor, also sardonically referred to as
“contingent labor” (Wald, 2014) and “supertemps” (Greenstone Miller & Miller,
2012) in the media, is a concerning shift because it places the onus for education,
training, and technology on the shoulders of the contingent laborer.

For instance, in a marketing firm, a freelance content strategist might be
required to provide their own computer with up-to-date security software; their
own specialty software for text editing, layout, and design; their own continuing
education training costs (to stay current with new technologies and software);
their own home internet connection or shared co-working space (if they work
remotely); and their own healthcare and retirement benefits. In other words, a huge technologic and vocational education infrastructure is being outsourced, and the onus is on the individual contingent laborer to provide all of these resources as a precondition for earning income.

As one might imagine, there is incredible promise and tremendous risk in this labor model. The problem with this type of labor model is that it leaves the individual laborer vulnerable to downturn markets and to unforeseen economic problems. In addition, as recent litigations with Uber, the personal car service provider, has shown, contingent labor have little recourse to unpaid wages and back pay outside of class-action lawsuits (Brown K. V., 2016). However, the promise of a freelance model, or gig economy, as it is sometimes referred to, is that it offers more flexibility for working hours, and there are more agencies popping up to help facilitate this type of labor market, such as Upwork, Contently, and HourlyNerd (Shrader, 2015). Additionally, these agencies can connect labor to different companies around the world, truly facilitating a transnational flow of capital.

As Alex Reid (2010) has also noted, this transnational flow of capital does not simply mean that capital is flowing into the United States. To the contrary,

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5 Shared co-work spaces have been gaining popularity in the last five years, and one of the largest of these companies, WeWork, just earned a $16 billion dollar valuation by the The Wall Street Journal (Brown, 2016). The cost for an on-demand workspace for each freelancer is $45 per month, or $450 for a team of co-workers (Brown, 2015).
what were once considered key jobs in a “knowledge economy”—engineers, computer programmers, lawyers, accountants—are now being offshored to the European and ASEAN markets. For Reid, this signifies the rise of a “post-knowledge” economy that will require “not only solid technical skills but also strong creative and rhetorical abilities to empathize with, and design powerful experiences for a variety or audiences/users” (2010, p. 254). Using the terminology of David Pink, Reid sees this economic shift as a move away from “instrumental reason” to a large-scale “understanding and appreciation of design” (2010, p. 259). This move away from instrumental reason is the realization that communication is less about logical connections between information and experience, and more about the interplay between Pink’s other “right-brain” senses: design, story, symphony, empathy, play, and meaning (2010, p. 260). To business communication scholars familiar with rhetorical theory, this emphasis on building relationships with your audience outside of strict instrumental reason may sound familiar—and along with Reid, I would agree that rhetorical theory has a lot to tell us about connecting our communicative practices into “larger flows of media and experience” (2010, p. 260).

Similar to Porter (2013) and Hart-Davidson et al.’s (2008) conceptualization of content management as a social interaction between
multiple audiences and an unfinished object, Reid has also described the post-knowledge design economy through its relationship to social technologies:

In short, as information technologies become increasingly about social uses (e.g. Wikipedia, del.icio.us, flickr), there is an increasing need for writers who can communicate the social dynamics of a technology; that is, someone who will be able to work with developers in helping to articulate and communicate their vision. (2010, p. 257)

In the world of professional communication, and I would claim this equally applies for business communication, Reid (2010) goes on to claim that it will no longer be enough for writers to produce clear and rational prose, but they will also have to contribute to user experiences. Reid’s point is further underscored by the rise of content strategy positions in industry over the last five years.

Correlating to the importance of social technologies, companies have been recognizing that the production of great communication drives their product and brand experience. Writing for The Guardian in 2013, Ben Barone-Nugent articulated the centrality of content, writing that:

content is the ethos, the spirit, the focus and experience of your product or brand. Content strategists design and model this experience and make sure that it’s functional, pitched correctly, enjoyable and easily maintained. (2013, p. n.p.)
If indeed these are the new economic realities that await our students after graduation, then by looking to HBS as a model for action we might benefit from rethinking our pedagogies in light of this economic reality before waiting for an outcry from either industry or academia to create a more effective mode of business communication training.

**Changes in higher education infrastructure.**

The second insight HBS’s historical narrative shows us is that we might benefit by looking to current national educational trends to determine how we might create a pedagogical response to this new economic reality. As HBS’s historical narrative has shown us, there was an economic tension between vocational training and the growing public school systems in America at the turn of the 20th century. The high school and university systems wanted to distance themselves from vocational education because they potentially saw it as subverting the goals of a liberal education. However, with the rise of industrialization came the need for technical, vocational education systems that gave laborers pragmatic and marketable skill sets.

If we ask ourselves what educational trends are at tension in our current historical moment, I would argue that open online education and skills boot camps are one of the biggest vocational challenges to the traditional model of higher education. Open online education, such as the sites Udemy and Edx, stems from
the advent of massive open online courses, or MOOCs. The term MOOCs has fallen off the radar in the last two years, but this is only because the definitional arguments about what constitutes a MOOC are still unfolding (and highly contested). As George Siemens (2012), a prominent researcher of networked learning platforms, has explained it, MOOCs are essentially online content management systems (CMS), or online platforms that allow you to host content, much like Facebook, Twitter, or iTunes. According to Siemens, there are two different ideological approaches to MOOCs currently. Connectivist MOOCs, or cMOOCs, “emphasize creation, creativity, autonomy, and social networked learning”, whereas the more public and monetized type of MOOCs, xMOOCs, “emphasize a more traditional learning approach through video presentations and short quizzes and testing” (2012, p. n.p.). The difference between these types of MOOCs is really about knowledge creation versus knowledge duplication, Siemens has explained, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the xMOOC platform that has gained the most amount of financial backing and publicity.

For many educators, xMOOCs are probably more recognizable by their corporate names: Coursera, Edx, Udemy, MITx, and Udacity. However, Sebastian Thrun, the innovator behind Google’s self-driving car and the founder of Udacity, does not consider Udacity an xMOOC—or even a MOOC at all. Instead of simply combining online video lessons with short quizzes and longer
projects for students to complete inside of a CMS platform, Udacity uses artificial intelligence to analyze students’ learning data and increase their retention and course completion rates (Brain Scan: Teaching Tomorrow, 2015). On platforms like Udacity, the education is free—with a staggering 60 percent course completion rate compared to 10 percent for the digital lectures series offered at higher education institutions—but students pay for their learning data feedback and for a certificate of course completion (Brain Scan: Teaching Tomorrow, 2015). Referred to as nanodegrees, these four to twelve-month courses are more often taught by course graduates or industry experts instead of traditional professors, which reduces the company’s financial overhead. In addition, with over four million users on Udacity alone, it would not be incorrect to call it the largest degree-granting institution in the world, currently.

Skills boot camps, such as the Flatiron School, The Iron Yard, and Coding Dojo, are short-term camps that teach students a demonstrable skill in under a year’s time. The most common boot camps are coding camps, teaching programming languages such as CSS, Ruby, Rails, and HTML. As of 2015, Skilledup.com (Toscano, 2015) had compiled a list of over 70 in-person and online coding boot camps available to students around the world. These boot camps can range in course time from either six weeks to three months, and their cost ranges from free of charge to several thousand dollars to a fixed percentage
of your first year’s salary upon graduation from the camp—usually around 18 to 20% (Toscano, 2015). In addition to teaching programming skills, students have a demonstrable portfolio that they can use once they hit the job market.

In addition to coding, skills boot camps have quickly branched out into the field of design. DESIGNATION’s boot camp, located in Chicago, is an 18-week program teaching full-stack design, which is a combination of user experience (UX), user interaction design (UI), and front-end programming languages (such as HTML and CSS). DESIGNATION is a mixed online and in-person boot camp run by the University of Illinois’ School of Graphic and Design Programs (DESIGNATION Labs, 2016). Like many boot camps, DESIGNATION charges a $12,000 tuition fee for their 18-month program, but they also boast an average of 62% salary increases for their graduates upon completion of the program (DESIGNATION Labs, 2016). With the promise of such a dramatic salary increase, it is easy to see why students are willing to pay the high cost of tuition.

As these boot camps gain popularity and expand into new subject matter, I suspect that content strategy will be the next subject area of boot camp expansion. Online composition is an overlap of four primary fields: back-end programming and development, front-end programming and development, graphic design and UX/UI, and content strategy. If the trend maintains, it is not
hard to imagine content strategy boot camps popping up around the nation in the next few years.

As these modes of open online education and skills boot camps gain more traction, companies are accepting nanodegrees in lieu of traditional four-year degrees and using a case study interview to gauge actual performable skills. Increasingly, the four-year degree is becoming a mere checkbox while a demonstration of competency or skill is more important qualifier in the interview process. Nanodegrees, combined with case studies, are poised to become the two biggest determinants of job qualification. Whereas case studies were once specialized interview tools used heavily in the consulting industry, which relies on a highly analytical workforce (Flynn, n.d.), they are now being used to assess a candidate’s logical reasoning and capacity for good judgment in a variety of industries, such as web and graphic design, accounting, professional writing and editing positions, marketing, law enforcement, and customer service-related positions. Anecdotally, during my recent two-year appointment as a consultant at the University of South Carolina’s Center for Business Communication, every student that I helped prepare for an interview at a major corporation (and not a small business) reported being given a case study to respond to during the interview. Arguably, the onsite teaching demonstration for business
communication pedagogues might also be thought of as a live pedagogical case study.

Returning to Reid’s (2010) discussion of the post-knowledge design economy, it is unsurprising to see that case studies are increasingly common rubrics for measuring performance in a more design-driven, post-knowledge economy. If we accept Reid’s (along with Pink and others) claim that this new economic future requires professional communicators who can incorporate intuition and empathy into their logical reasoning, then it makes sense why the case study is gaining popularity in industry. As Helen Simons (1996) has noted in her research, one of the biggest advantages of case studies is that they have a capacity for helping people understand complexity in very particular contexts. At the exact same time, case studies frustrate our desire to create sweeping generalizations based on just a single case (Simons, 1996). Therefore, the case study can be used as a tool for exercising judgment in the face of immediate and contingent circumstances while also avoiding the fallacy of making generalizable claims about how one might respond in other similar communicative situations. As such, case studies might become a more standard form of communicating the demands of a position by interviewers—as well as a standard form of communicating job capability by the interviewee.
This point is underscored by the growing reliance on case studies in industry. As I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, companies like Red Hat are hiring divisions of content strategists to write corporate case studies about their customers’ successful experiences with their company or products. Even further, the risk management industry has been planning for the unknown future by inventing case studies that do not simply reflect past historical record but, instead, are based on fictional scenarios. *Risk & Insurance* magazine has been working with industry leaders to create hypothetical scenarios that they then pass on to a specific industry executive who responds in a detailed plan, providing reasoning for each decision that they make. These hypothetical cases are collected into an online bank where anyone can access them and see how other people from around the world responded by using a crowd sourced CMS platform (Risk & Insurance, n.d.).

This method of planning for an unknown future has also been adopted by two governmental agencies as well: the Centers for Disease Control and the Department of Defense. The CDC’s zombie preparedness plan initially began as a marketing gimmick to gain more click-through traffic on their website. However, as the CDC’s director, Ali Kahn, says on the their website, “If you are generally well equipped to deal with a zombie apocalypse you will be prepared for a hurricane, pandemic, earthquake, or terrorist attack” (Prevention, 2014).
DOD’s plan, on the other hand, was not meant to be tongue-in-cheek. Otherwise known as “Counter-Zombie Dominance,” CONOP 8888 tells us in its disclaimer that, “this plan was not designed as a joke” (Lubold, 2014). The plan was created from 2009 through 2011 so that the DOD could prepare for a disaster that had high transmissibility, and the fantastical element of zombies provided a great possible corollary to other infectious pandemics. This growing use of case studies by industries that traffic in risk management and future unknowns might be a good indicator that case studies will only become more important to our students’ lives as they graduate and move on to industry.

**Using a Genre System Approach to Understand Case Study**

**Pedagogy in Business Communication**

Across the academy, different fields have adapted their own use of case study pedagogy to better fit their unique education needs in the 21st century. These fields have tailored case study pedagogy to meet their own needs, adapting both its delivery (e.g., using video and social media channels) and the case products that students are asked to produce (e.g., oral presentations, physical demonstrations, and other products beyond written documents) so that this pedagogical tool effectively meets field-specific learning outcomes. Additionally, many different industrial fields have begun relying on case studies as a way to communicate their value and to think through future unknown
market conditions. In this way, case studies are still a very powerful tool in both higher education as well as industry.

In contrast, business communication has largely accepted the definitions and models of teaching cases developed by HBS in the 1920s without developing our own field-specific approach—or acknowledging that a massive body of case literature exists across the academy. Because business communication has not invested much energy into developing a 21st-century approach to case study pedagogy, it is currently an ineffective pedagogical approach in our field.

In order to rehabilitate case study pedagogy in business communication, and to establish business communication as a sub-field of professional and technical communication built around a given pedagogical approach, this project is framed around investigating the genre system of case study pedagogy in our field. In using the term genre system, I am specifically referencing Janis Forman and Jone Rymer’s (1999) work, which focuses on multiple genres that interact to form a complex system. As David Russell (1997) has argued, various genres within a system are related intertextually. Because of this intertextual relationship, a “diachronic and bidirectional relation may develop between genres within the same system” (Forman & Rymer, 1999, p. 376). In their work, Forman and Rymer have used this concept to investigate how the case write-up operates alongside and in relationship to other writing genres in business
schools, forming an entire genre system of what constitutes writing in the academic and professional world of business. As the main form of written analysis used in business school case studies, the case write-up details various steps in a student’s analytical decision-making process. For Forman and Rymer, when taken in concert with other forms of written communication, these documents form a genre system of business communication, and this system can help us understand the ways in which writing is used in business schools and how it functions as a communicative apparatus.

Forman and Rymer’s concept of a genre system is very similar to Wanda Orlikowski and JoAnne Yates’ (1994) understanding of genre repertoire. A genre repertoire, for Orlikowski and Yates, is a set of genres that are enacted by an organization or a group, enabling them to accomplish their goals. To be a successful member of that organization, a person has to develop modes of communication that include writing, speaking, and navigating norms and expectations (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). In much the same way, Forman and Rymer are investigating how different forms of written communication work together in business schools to create shared expectations and norms of business writing. Both the concept of genre systems and genre repertoire are building on the perspective of genre as social action that Carolyn R. Miller (1984) first introduced over 30 years ago. In Miller’s use of the term, genre is not defined by
the, “substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (1984, p. 151). Instead of looking solely at written, textual analysis to determine how genres operate, scholars who view genre as a socially mediated and enacted set of behaviors look at the communities in which those behaviors circulate (Luzon, 2005). In this social perspective, written text is one sight among many to locate the work of genre production.

Using the term genre system, I argue, is a powerful conceptual apparatus because it helps us understand the interconnectedness of the different genres that all comprise a system. Inside of a genre system, when one component, or genre is altered, it produces effects that also alter the rest of the system. For instance, in Forman and Rymer’s work, when the genre of the case write-up is altered, it affects how we conceptualize (and perform) writing practices as a whole in the ecology of business schools. Likewise, when we alter the ways in which we distribute case studies to students in business communication, composition processes and reading practices for those students will also be necessarily altered. In this way, I think that the concept of genre systems is a productive way to extend conversations about ecology that have been pervasive in the fields of professional and technical communication, composition, and rhetorical theory for the last ten years (for an overview of the ecological metaphor in composition, see Rivers & Weber, 2011).
Building on Forman and Rymer’s work on genre systems and case write-ups, I argue that examining *case study pedagogy* as a genre system in business communication brings many of the *tacit* material and discursive components of this workplace genre system into visible relief. This process can help us understand why business communication instructors are using case study pedagogy and the diverse ways in which it functions as a teaching apparatus in our classrooms. However, I would also like to extend the work of Forman and Rymer by looking outside of just the case write-up and looking at a more complex set of practices. Case study pedagogy, as I define it, refers to the complex set of texts, classroom practices, and composition processes. In this sense, it goes far beyond just case write-ups, or case products. By using the genre system approach, I am examining how each aspect of case study pedagogy in business communication forms an interlocking set of genres that all contribute to our valuation of case study pedagogy’s utility for the field.

In order to establish the boundaries of this inquiry, I am employing Anthony Paré and Graham Smart’s set of four dimensions through which we can chart genres in action. According to Paré and Smart, we can map genres through: a set of texts, the composing processes involved in creating these texts, the reading practices used to interpret them, and the social roles performed by writers and readers. (1994, p. 147)
The authors caution, however, that these four dimensions are loose and slippery at best. Since no two enactments of a genre can ever be the same, “genre is in a constant state of evolution” (Pare & Smart, 1994, p. 153). Not only does the performance of genre change in response to the exigencies that exist, but it also changes in response to a, “dissatisfaction in one or more of the dimensions of genre” (Pare & Smart, 1994, p. 153). In other words, genres evolve in response to their use in a complex system of users and environment, but also in response to the limitations that might exist with assigned social roles for the readers, for instance. Therefore, to use these four dimension successfully with an object of analysis, we might need to slightly alter them.

In recognition of this evolutionary behavior of genre, my project uses Paré and Smart’s four categories, but in a manner that responds the unique contours of case study pedagogy. Chapter two continues by investigating the mode of case studies that are available to educators, or the texts that we use in case study pedagogy. Currently, business communication lacks an explicit taxonomy of case types that would let educators select a genre of case study for their exact needs. Since different types of cases serve different ends, pedagogues need to be aware of the benefits of using one case type over another in their classroom.

In the chapter three, I examine the composing processes used in constructing those case study texts. However, to respond to the unique contours of case study
pedagogy, I also discuss the distribution processes that business communication has in place to circulate case studies out to educators and students. Fields like business administration and the physical and life sciences have developed extensive online case repositories for the composition and the distribution of cases to a national audience. Outside of Business and Professional Communication Quarterly’s 1998 attempt to create an online case library, our field does not have a repository for educators to easily find cases for their curriculum.

In chapter four, I address the classroom practices used in case study pedagogy as a way of asking after reading and interpretive practices. Business communication instructors utilize discussion-based classroom to unpack the core issues of a case, and I argue that this style of classroom engagement often works counter to the goals that these educators claim they have for case studies in their curriculum. Business communication has done little to rethink the discussion-based classroom approach that dominated case study pedagogy across the academy throughout the 20th century. However, other fields, like medical education, have shown that case-based discussion methods are ineffective at predicting future performance and the exercising of good judgment (Williamson & Osborne, 2012).

Finally, in chapter five, I examine the social roles of both instructors and students by looking at the technologies we use in case study pedagogy and how
they directly inform the ways in which our students read and understand case studies. Although business communication has spent time theorizing the effects of new media in the classroom, we have not yet incorporated those insights into our composition or case studies—or what we are asking our students to produce, as well. Largely, case studies are delivered as paper of PDF documents, and they ask our students to produce paper-based or oral speech-driven case products.

Since case study pedagogy is so ubiquitous in our classrooms (with many instructors using it even without calling it by name), it is important to ask how business communication has conceptualized its genre system of case study pedagogy so that we might discover overlooked issues or approaches and bring this 20th-century pedagogy more fully into the 21st century. Throughout this project, my goal is not to create a new, proscriptive pedagogical approach to case study pedagogy. Rather, my goal is to start a conversation in our field about the potentiality of this pedagogical method for grounding the field of business communication and to show several ways that we can begin to rethink our approach to case study pedagogy in the 21st century.
CHAPTER TWO

TEACHING CASES AS TEXTS

Case study pedagogy has been an active component of business communication since the early 1940s, at least, but it received little scholarly attention until the mid-1970s (Kynell, 2000). As William Rivers (1994) has claimed in his history of the field, the 1960s and 1970s were a significant period of pedagogical shift because many instructors still identified as literature faculty. These instructors were largely conducting historical studies of letter writing and various professional documents as that was how they were trained to perform research, Rivers (1994) has noted. However, by the early 1970s, there was a rapid proliferation of “business, technical, and science writing courses” (Tebeaux, 1985, p. 419). Along with this proliferation came a host of industry studies showing that our students were not receiving the instruction they needed for entry-level work in industry (Tebeaux, 1985), which led to renewed calls for “public writing” assignments that pushed writing into the “real world” in a host of new ways (Sherman, 1972). This renewed interest in modes of public writing was reinforced with subsequent calls to return to our commitments to, “the service concept we used to hold,” in our instruction (MacIntosh, 1975, p. 33). In a return
to the founding philosophy of Morrill Land Grant universities, MacIntosh and others, urged instructors to remember that their “first duty” was to teaching effective language use for the world’s work, and that support from industry for our pedagogical mission would depend entirely on our ability to graduate students who are prepared for the communicative demands of professional life (1975, p. 33). 6

This conversation about professional preparation took on the conceptual frame of bridging the divide between school and the workplace during the mid-1970s and 1980s (Hays, 1976; Flower, 1981; Barton, 1981; Butler, 1985; Moore, 1987). For business communication scholars like Linda Flower (1981), asking students to undertake assignments with no real-world relevance or application only widens the gap between school and work. The writing tactics that students use to complete these more “traditional assignments” become “downright liabilities when they go to work,” (1981, p. 37) These traditional assignments are conceptualized by Flower as what we might call forms: patterned types of essays or writing prompts that focus on forms that students don’t actually encounter in the real world. Flower has argued, and one way to help correct this is to use

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6 Sherman’s article seems to be the first shot across the bow of public writing, predating Lester Faigley’s Writing in Nonacademic Settings by 13 years, and it quite radically outlines a program for getting students published and paid for their labor. This line of pedagogical scholarship, of using the classroom as a site of free-lance paid writing, seems to have died out after Sherman – at least in written scholarship.
teaching cases that stress the importance of audience analysis and a robust understanding of the rhetorical situation. For Rivers, then, the 1980s signaled a “new era” of business communication pedagogy, which coincided with both a rise in case study pedagogy literature in journals and monographs, as well as the widespread publication of teaching cases in textbook publishing—either as end-of-chapter assignments or as more central components of the text.

Although case study pedagogy gained popularity in business communication courses during the 1980s, it is virtually non-existent in technical communication during this time, as Elizabeth Tebeaux (1985) has noted. This proliferation of case study pedagogy first in business communication courses (before technical communication or professional communication programs) can be linked to the fact that many of these courses were housed in, or had close contact with, schools of business. As Scot Ober’s (1987) research has shown, by 1987 78% of all business communication courses were being taught in business administration programs (this figure drops slightly to 69% when only discussing two-year institutions).

As a result, when business communication instructors sought to incorporate case study pedagogy into their curriculum, they adopted the business school genre system of the case method approach, developed at Harvard Business School in the 1920s (Copeland M. T., 1954). As the journal evidence
indicates, business communication scholars did very little questioning as to whether the case method style of case study pedagogy was compatible with the aims and the exigencies of business communication courses. If we look at the corpus of scholarship about case study pedagogy in business communication writ large, most of the literature has focused on making definitional claims, developing taxonomies of teaching cases, and arguing for the pedagogical utility of case study pedagogy. Notably, key aspects of the genre system of case study pedagogy are never addressed, such as what types of assignments—or case products—instructors ask their students to produce in conjunction with case studies, how instructors gather research and write cases for classroom use, or even how instructors use cases in the classroom. Because these conversations go untouched in our field’s written scholarship, they form what David R. Russell (1991) has called a tacit tradition in academic writing.

In Writing in the Academic Disciplines, David Russell (1991) has claimed that American education developed several tacit and unsystematic traditions of student writing that have shaped the teaching of writing in the academy: the notebook, the research paper, the lab report, the essay examination, and the business school case study (the case write-up). “Unfortunately,” Russell wrote, “these tacit traditions of student writing have rarely been studied, much less from a historical perspective” (Russell, 1991, p. 19). According to Russell, as the
American university system developed from the Germanic model of specialization and departmentalization in the 1800s, it cloistered disciplines from one another, cutting off interdepartmental communication and mutually shared knowledge. And as academic disciplines have continued to seek institutional legitimation through scientific inquiry, certain tacit traditions of writing instruction have fallen out of explicit conversation even though these traditions, like the case write-up, are significant methods of acculturation between academia and industry (Russell, 1991). Russell’s use of the term acculturation signals a diachronic movement between school and the workplace where the case product (the write-up) acts as a sort of linkage between the two ecologies. And indeed, businesses are now using case studies in their corporate training efforts just as much as educators are using them in the university.

Russell’s analysis can be extended out beyond the walls of the business school case write-up and applied to the larger genre system of case study pedagogy in business communication. In this sense, I argue that the entire process of composing and using case studies in business communication is a tacit pedagogical tradition in our field that has drawn heavily on the Harvard Business School (HBS) case method approach.

With this view in mind, this chapter unpacks the heart of case study pedagogy and the first component in the genre system of case study pedagogy:
the teaching case. The remaining space of this chapter presents readers with a matrix of the various types of teaching cases used in business communication. By laying out this matrix, we can address the primary question of what constitutes a case in our field, and why instructors choose to use certain types of cases over others.

**A Matrix Of Teaching Cases**

Across the literature in business communication, case study pedagogy operates under a variety of different names. Depending on the author, it is variously referred to as the *casebook approach* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1962); the *case method* (Little, 1971); the *case study approach* (Huseman, 1973); the *case study method* (Robbins, 1975); *case problems* (Hays, 1976); the *Self-Actualizing Case Method* (SACM) (Gunn & Mitchell, 1982); and *case study pedagogy* (Williams & Strother, 2004), just to name a few. While I’m not suggesting that competing terminologies for case study pedagogy shouldn’t exist in our literature, these terms come with discrete institutional histories, with contested definitions of what constitutes a case study, and with precise pedagogical purposes—all of which often go unrecognized by the authors that use them.

For example, the *casebook approach* is the term for law school pedagogy that asks students to explore questions of legal precedent by examining prior rulings (Garvin, 2003). The *case method* (sometimes called the case study method) is the
term developed by HBS’s administration (during an official faculty vote in 1921) for their business pedagogy that trains students for quick decision making in the face of an unknowable outcome (Copeland M. T., 1954) (McN54). Case problems are types of cases used in the behavioral sciences, much like clinical cases in the medical fields, to present a jumbled-up narrative of a patient history (or a scenario) in which the diagnostician has to come to establish a diagnosis and a treatment plan (Hays, 1976). And case study pedagogy, as used in technical and scientific communication literature, describes the use of research cases in teaching for illustrative or descriptive purposes (Williams & Strother, 2004).

These institutional histories greatly impact our understanding of what constitutes a case study, which is why there is such a wide varience in the definitional claims when it comes to this subject. And further, these different names for case study pedagogy have an effect on our students. Imagine, for instance, the exigencies that our students attach to the term problem that they might not attach to the term study; the first term might indicate that they need to locate and solve a dilemma whereas the second term might indicate a more exploratory project. When presented with different terminlogies for case pedagogy, our language has a material consequence in our teaching and in our students’ expectations of what they will be required to produce.
As the primary genre component of case study pedagogy, case studies have been historically hard to define because so many competing definitions seem to extend in directions that are mutually exclusive of one another. Since case studies have been a part of higher education for well over 140 years, extending back to military education and social work training in the mid-1800s (Brossard & Dewhurst, 1931), Lawrence Kingsley (1982) has noted that there are as many types of case studies as there are instructors. “The term has been used,” Kingsley wrote, “for such [disparate writings] as *Aesop’s Fables* and Biblical parables,” which only adds to the institutional confusion in achieving a uniform understanding of what constitutes a case study.

As a common starting point for parsing out the different types of cases in business communication, Mary Sue MacNealy (1999) has written that case studies used as a research method are distinct from teaching cases used as a pedagogical resource. As a research method, a research case is a, “carefully designed project to systematically collect information about an event, situation, or small group of persons or objects for the purpose of exploring, describing, and/or explaining aspects not previously known or considered” (MacNealy, 1999, p. 195). Cases that fall into this genre might include studies published by USC Annenberg School’s *Case Studies in Strategic Communication*. The studies published in this online, peer-reviewed, open access journal cover a much
shorter time period and involve fewer participants than longer-term ethnographies, such as Cory Young and Arhlene Flowers’ (2012) study of a social media firestorm caused by two employees of Domino’s Pizza taking pictures of food they defaced at work. These types of research cases are used to show students and professionals alike the internal decision-making process of a company when responding to a problem or dilemma and what we can learn from either their successes or failures.

*Teaching cases,* on the other hand, explicitly place the student as a protagonist in a real or fictional situation so that they can work through a problem first-hand. These cases are “given as simulation exercises” and they are taught in an analogous way that astronauts prepare for space: “by carrying out various activities in a capsule or machine which simulates weightlessness” (MacNealy, 1999, p. 197). While these two different types of case studies are in the same genus, they are different species with different purposes and different uses, according to MacNealy.

The benefit of MacNealy’s distinction is that the category of teaching cases is broad enough to be inclusive of a wide range of approaches. However, this same distinction ignores the fact that research cases can be used as teaching cases, as they often are in technical and scientific communication courses. To amend MacNealy’s distinction and provide a more granular view of the different
types of teaching cases that exist, we can turn to a wide body of journal and monograph publications over the last 40 years and extract six different teaching case trends in business communication. Since there is such a wide variation of teaching cases, these six trends are mapped out in this chapter according to the three-dimensional matrix below.

Figure 2.1: Matrix of Teaching Cases in Business communication

In its central and primary dimension, we can plot a teaching case according to its relationship to realism. These cases range from fantastical scenarios—such as magic genies granting wishes—to real-life (or live) cases where the students are actually working hands-on with a company or an individual.
This dimension of realism has been the dominant focus of definitional claims about cases, and it is directly attached to pedagogical arguments about the utility of cases in business communication curriculum. However, we can further parse teaching cases according to the level of details they provide to the students. In this dimension, we can write cases in a holistic manner, where all the relevant and necessary details and information of a case are present, or in an open-ended manner, where students must go out beyond the written case study to gather any necessary research or information. In their final dimension, we can map teaching cases in business communication according to the way that they organize the information presented to students. On one end of this spectrum, cases can include a highly stylized and detailed narrative, offering students a story that unfolds in a logical progression. On the other end, cases can simply be a loose collection of data, tables, facts, and figures, organized with no guiding narrative to aid the student at all.

**Fantastical to Real-Life Cases**

Each of these case approaches have different pedagogical reasons and, as their authors claims, they replicate a normative aspect of how communicative situations occur in the workplace. In order to provide the reader with a more structured way to work through this matrix of teaching cases, this chapter first
presents the following taxonomies according to their dimension of realism since this is the primary differentiator of teaching cases.

**Fantastical cases.**

In examining the case study matrix, we will first look at case studies’ relationship to realism. Although they are more rare in business communication, there are cases that exist as pure fantasy, detached from any concern for realism in their content. The earliest of these case types I have found in print is from Field and Weiss’s 1979 *Cases for Composition*. In a short one-page teaching case, titled “The Magic Case,” a “moment of fantasy intrudes,” and the student is granted the chance to, “come back again not as you are but as you might like to be” (Field & Weiss, 1979, p. 17). The setup is very short and very vague, but the student is to, presumably, think about who or what they would like to come back to life as and then state their case to the magician who has conferred this opportunity on them, justifying their choices.

Although they are uncommon and often dismissed by anyone as actual teaching cases (see Williams and Strother, 2004), these fantastical cases are included in books or collections of teaching cases and they deserve scrutiny as to why. In the introduction to their textbook, Field and Weiss define cases as, “practical writing situations – highly focused, extended assignments in which students must assume a role that requires writing” (1979, p. vii). This definition
seems incongruous with “The Magic Case” unless the practicality of the writing situation lies in the classical rhetorical mode of the writing itself—in this case, *exposition*. In this instance, then, the demand for realism is replaced with a concern for practicality in the type of generic rhetorical mode that is being taught.

Because there is a little need for constructing a detailed and meticulous rhetorical situation that grounds the fantastical teaching cases, they are often very short, much like case scenarios, which are described below. However, fantastical cases should not be thought of as open-ended or as lacking detail, because the student is given everything that they need to complete the case in the short fantastical set-up. No additional research or outside information is necessary.

**Case Scenarios.**

Much like fantastical cases, case scenarios are very short problem-based situations that ask the student to assume the protagonist role and intervene in some manner. Case scenarios can be found, nearly ubiquitously, as “end-of-chapter” assignments in business communication textbooks since the 1970s (Rozumalski & Graves, 1995).7 These case scenarios are between one to four paragraphs, at the most, with a task directive for the student at the end. For that

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7 See, for instance, the following textbooks: Locker & Kienzler, 2014; Munger, 2005; Poe and Fruehling, 1994; and Thill and Bovée, 2015.
reason, Lynn Rozumalski and Michael Graves (1995) have referred to these case
types as *scenarios* to signify their brevity and the absence of anything more than a
facile rhetorical situation that sketches some context for the student.

The earliest record of case scenarios in the field of writing that I have
found dates back to the 1940s. In 1945, Frederick Abbuhl was among the early
cadre of faculty members to advocate for including case scenarios in technical
writing, “so that technical writing students could learn to work in the context of
the workplace” (Kynell, 2000, p. 95). As the acting head of the English
department at Rensselaer, Abbuhl presented two sample teaching cases in his
1945 piece, “A Writing Laboratory Course,” which are among the first examples
of this new pedagogy for engineering English education in a journal publication,
as shown in Appendix A. While entire books organized around case studies
were not very popular in the 1940s, as Kynell (2000) has told us, cases like these
were regular end-of-chapter components of other textbooks, as they still continue
to be today. A gap in our institutional knowledge does exist here, however, since
we do not know how Abbuhl and others used these case scenarios in their
classroom. This is still an area of research that demands more attention in our
scholarship, even though it is not the explicit focus of this project.

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8 The examples are duplicated as close as possible to their original document formatting to give
readers a sense of how writing students in the 1940s may have encountered these cases on the
page.
For many instructors who use teaching cases in the classroom, several commonly recognizable features are present in Abbuhl’s teaching case scenarios that form business communication’s most common approach to composing a teaching case. Most noticeably, the student is assigned the central protagonist’s role in the case, and to aid the student, background information is provided, such as key facts of the story. The role that the writer is to assume (e.g., secretary of a local society, special interest article writer for a publication) is specified, and the student is also given the exact assignment they are to complete along with any special instructions for completing it.

Abbuhl’s case scenarios exemplify a lineage of case study pedagogy that is much more reminiscent of short narrative problems in mathematics (e.g., *A train leaves the station at 10:30am traveling from Chicago to New York…*) than it is of longer narrative case formats like the HBS case method approach. These cases have an abridged form and lack a significant rhetorical situation because they are tied to a much older lineage of problem-based learning (PBL) in higher education that utilizes brief scenarios as a way of contextualizing abstract problems. As James Bossard and Frederic Dewhurst (1931) explained in their history of American business school education, problem-based learning has been a prominent mode of teaching since the 1800s, spanning the sciences, mathematics, medicine, and the humanities. However, the use of short narrative problems as a
contextually-situated approach to problem solving was not theorized and articulated as PBL until the 1960s when it was popularized in McMaster University’s medical school pedagogy (Norman & Schmidt, 1992).

The pedagogical tenet of PBL is to reinforce learned conceptual thinking through the application of a concept to a concrete, solvable problem; in other words, PBL scenarios act as a sort of deductive empirical teaching tool. Much as the progression of a logical syllogism, where general rules move to more specific applications, PBL asks the student to take a general concept and map it onto a discrete situation. Over two decades, PBL pedagogy morphed into case-based learning (CBL) theory during the 1980s in business communication, which was often used explicitly as a way to apply textbook readings to workplace scenarios and to reinforce learning through application of key concepts covered in lectures (Miller D., 1982).

Whereas most of these case scenarios are purely fictional (or hypothetical), newer texts, such as John Thill and Courtland Bovée’s 2015 Excellence in Business Communication, have begun including case scenarios based on real companies. In a end-of-chapter section simply labelled “Cases,” Thill and Bovée have included one- to two-paragraph case scenarios structured with a brief overview of the company (or problem) and a task section that explains what students are expected to produce:
Tumblr has become a popular ‘short-form’ blogging platform by combining the simplicity of Twitter with the ability to share photos and other media easily. Tumblr is free to join, and you can learn more about using it at www.tumblr.com/help.

**Your task:** Write a 300- to 400-word post for your class blog that explains how to set up an account on Tumblr and get involved in the Tumblr community. (Thill & Bovee, 2015, p. 217)

In most of these case scenarios, to substitute for the lack of a robust rhetorical situation, students are told to invent any necessary details, just as they are in other textbooks.

Unfortunately, we do not know how instructors use case scenarios in the classroom, and there is no scholarly literature discussing their utility to business communication curriculum. It is arguable that these types of case scenarios are more popular as a fixture of textbook publishing because, as in the instance of Thill and Bovée’s text, the authors can fit between 15 and 20 of them onto three pages, but there is no supporting evidence for this claim.

At their best, because of the brevity and the lack of situated context for the students, case scenarios seem to aim at showing students that communication can be complex. In other words, they appear to show students that the task of
responding to a local engineering society comes with a different exigency than composing an article for a magazine, as in Abbuhl’s examples. But at their worst, case scenarios simply replicate the very problem that most instructors have with textbooks: the false categorization of informative versus bad news or persuasive communication sends students into the real world with broken recipes for all occasions (Eubanks, 1994). Whereas real-world communication is rhetorically complex, case scenarios contradict the very use of teaching cases as a way to simulate the real-life exigency and complexity that is inherent in any communicative encounter (Eubanks, 1994).

**Hypothetical cases.**

Hypothetical, or fictional, cases are by far the most common form of teaching cases in business communication, and for good reason. Hypothetical cases can give the appearance that the information was gathered from a real company while simplifying the most time-consuming part of case composition for instructors: the relationship building and research gathering necessary when working with real businesses. As a result, hypothetical cases are usually shorter than case method cases or research cases that use data from real corporations, but they also provide more information and context to the student than case scenarios. When most business communication scholars refer to using the case method in their pedagogical approach, what they are really referring to are
hypothetical cases, which are a direct descendent from the HBS case method tradition (where they are referred to as *armchair cases*), but they are not quite the same (Culliton, 1954).

Organizationally, the form of a hypothetical case can be often quite simple due to its brevity and lack of elaborate detail. In the instance of the ABC’s Casebook Project, the student writer receives a short background narrative on her role in the company, which is presented alongside the communication dilemma that grounds the case. Cases can also provide several assignments to choose from (or the instructor might ask students to work through each assignment in stages). In the Casebook Project, Barbara Shwom, Penny Hirsch, and Judith Messick’s (1998) fictional case about the Davis-Martin PR firm places the student as an assistant account executive, an account executive, or an assistant (depending on the assignment you complete at the end of the case) at a fictional public relations firm working closely with a state Chamber of Commerce organization.

This three-part organizational scheme (background, problem, task) takes different forms, as we can see in Roger Munger’s *Document-Based Cases for Technical Writing*. Munger’s case begins with a brief background, but then includes a section detailing why communication in this type of scenario can be a
challenge. Only after this explanation does the student receive a series of tasks that build upon each other.

A large resource of business communication cases has been collected through the Association for Business Communication’s 1998 Casebook Project, which was edited by Pricilla Rogers and Jone Rymer and refereed by the national Case Editorial Review Board. These types of teaching cases range anywhere from one page to 15 pages in length, depending on whether they contain a longer narrative or sample documents for the students to read through. As Munger has defined them, a hypothetical teaching case is simply a detailed narrative from the workplace complete with, “characters, dialogue, and props in the form of sample documents” (2005, p. v). However, in their introduction to the Casebook Project, Rogers and Rymer provided a more detailed definition to anchor our understanding of what differentiates a hypothetical case from other teaching case styles:

they provide a slice of business life inside the classroom. Cases are just that—instances of business experience. The case creates a realistic situation for all members of a class to experience the events in a company, enabling everyone to participate in both learning about and practicing business/management communication. A case provides the social dimensions for analyzing and discussing communication issues in context,
and it furnishes the audience with a specific situation, a business setting, and a role for learners to perform as communicators in ways that more nearly represent writing and speaking in the workplace than most classroom-based pedagogies. (Rogers & Rymer, 1998, p. 8; emphasis original)

As Rogers and Rymer have put it, hypothetical cases are realistic situations that allow us to experience an issue in a context that functions representationally as a real-life encounter with speaking and writing in the workplace.

This claim of case study pedagogy’s utility, its representation of realism and complexity in the professional workplace, is one of the most frequently voiced arguments for the use of teaching cases in business communication over 30 years of scholarship (see, for instance, Hays, 1976; Tedlock, 1981; Barton & Barton, 1981; Gunn and Mitchell, 1982; Moore, 1987; Stevens, 1996; Zhao, 1996; Hildebrand, 1997; Rogers and Rymer, 1998). Throughout this literature, this argument is presented in varying ways that locate this utility in different components of the teaching case. For instance, Robert Hays (1976) has presented this argument in more vague terms, claiming that teaching cases stimulate, “interest through realism,” because of the presentation of the narrative to its audience. Ben and Marthalee Barton (1981), on the other hand, have claimed that case studies provide realism by showing students what the role of a professional
engineer actually involves in the workplace. In addition to properly representing professional roles, cases correct the fact that students “misconstrue the general nature of technical communication itself,” they wrote (Barton & Barton, 1981, p. 23). Students are unaware that communication is a transactional process, according to Barton and Barton, and case studies help them understand that communication in the real world is not something that happens after solutions are found for problems. Instead, communication is constitutive of the decision-making process itself.

The difference between Hays’s and Barton and Barton’s arguments is one of locating the realism in teaching cases in its form, its task, or in a process of doing that replicates a workplace activity. For some scholars, like Hays, the utility of realism might be found in how the narrative form makes the case appear as if it had happened in real life, which pulls the reader’s interest into the story. For Rogers and Rymer, this narrative aspect goes beyond the presentation of detail and involves putting the student in a realistic role that mimics a task they might perform in the workplace. But for Barton and Barton, the process of communicating with others to make decisions and achieve desired ends is the real utility of employing cases in our curriculum.

When arguments for the realism of hypothetical cases hinge on the format of the case itself, they are open to an oft-cited critique that has been around since
the 1950s, at least. In the early HBS scholarship on teaching cases, instructors warned against the use of armchair cases, or hypothetical cases, because they lacked a sufficient attachment to reality. As James Culliton, an early case writer at HBS, noted:

At times when the case collection process does not unearth the kind of business problem which a professor has been seeking, a research assistant may be tempted to write a case which is a composite of several different real situations. Such cases (known at the Business School as armchair cases) should be used with caution. They are among the most difficult to write because the absence of outside facts against which they can be checked may lead to inconsistencies within the case and to the inclusion of unreal and unrealistic business problems. The use, and especially the excessive use, of armchair cases may defeat one of the prime purposes of the case system, which is not to illustrate theories but to force professors and students alike to face real business facts. (Culliton, 1954, p. 268)

For Culliton, artificiality causes the substitution of patterned theory for a face-to-face encounter with real business facts from which we can then extrapolate concepts to guide our actions. In other words, Culliton negates the deductive empirical approach that many business communication case pedagogues espouse (see Greenwood, 1993; Zhao, 1996; Rogers and Rymer 1998) in favor of an
inductive empiricism that lies at the heart of the HBS case method. Instead of having students apply a theory or principle to the case’s situation, using it as a proving ground for applicability, the inductive model uses the case as the raw material from which students will discover those theories or principles.

This same critique of artificiality was echoed in business communication during the 1980s when Marilyn Butler critiqued these “abbreviated” and “open-ended” problems for failing to provide anything but a “superficial identification with the persona they must assume, much less with the given circumstances and audiences” (1985, p. 4). This artificiality, which she argues is inherent to both ficational and real-life teaching cases (no matter how well-wrought the real-life case intends to be), encourages over-simplification, shallow responses, and formulaic approaches to problem solving. To resolve this problem of artifice, Butler recommends live cases that put the student in direct contact with a company or a professional.

One important point to note here is that, in the existing literature, these critiques of artificiality do not disappear when we shift the argument for realism away from the form or the task of the teaching case and relocate it to the process of doing that students experience by working through a case. As both Bruce Gunn and Ivor Mitchell (1982) and Robert Hays (1976) have argued, since cases rely on learning by doing, they are best used to impart process-oriented skills to students
that they will need in the workplace. However, more recent arguments have critiqued this argument about skills transfer for failing to reproduce the “authentic contexts” (Kain & Wardle, 2005, p. 114) and “dynamic contexts” (Kohn, 2015, p. 169) of the workplace. According to Liberty Kohn, even the “abundance of case study documents and scenarios” meant to reproduce the real world cannot replicate the dynamic context of the workplace, and this creates a transference problem when “exporting problem-solving and writing strategies from education to the workplace” (2015, p. 169).

The rhetorical case.

One specific type of hypothetical teaching case that deserves some attention is the rhetorical case, developed by Linda Flower in 1981.⁹ Flower proposed a style of teaching case that provides a body of information in an, “unsifted, temporal form in which writers in the professions usually uncover it,” and that focuses on a rhetorical problem, not a management problem (1981, p. 40). Because most business communication teaching cases that were already in circulation during the 1970s were developed in business schools and management departments, Flower notes that many of these cases focus on organizational psychology and decision making instead of developing the

⁹ Flower’s taxonomy of teaching cases is not referenced again until 1989 when John DiGaetani references it as an alternative to “actual cases” from the case method tradition, and then it isn’t reference in business communication again (p. 200).
specialized skill of “rhetorical strategy” (1981, p. 40). Rhetorical cases should give the facts, but the writer’s job is to generate concepts and create a structure for their response on their own, according to Flower, because their, “ultimate goal is to help students test and develop communication strategies that they will be able to use outside the classroom” (1981, p. 40). This means not supplying them with sample document formats before the assignments and then having them try to replicate the structure of the memo example in front of them.

For Flower, rhetorical cases exist at the end of a spectrum of teaching assignments where their polar opposites are highly realistic, uncontrolled projects. Projects can take the form of internships or hands-on workplace experience where, “they encounter the unexpected and deal with the political and personal forces that impinge on professionals when they write” (1981, p. 39). For Flower, these projects are not cases because rhetorical cases are a “specifically focused, goal-directed” teaching tool with defined boundaries to the rhetorical situation. Simulations and games are one step to the right of these uncontrolled projects on Flower’s spectrum, and they work to limit some of these controllable forces so that students can take on various roles in “predictable communication problems” (Flower, 1981, p. 39). What these simulations and games lose in realistic complexity they gain in their focus and teachability in the classroom. And one more step to the right on the spectrum are problem-solving
assignments that ask students to identify a problem they have encountered at
school or work and then write a consulting report that helps solve the problem.

Figure 2.2: Flower’s Spectrum of Teaching Assignments

Flower’s taxonomy of teaching assignments very narrowly construes what
counts as a teaching case, dismissing live cases, case scenarios, and fantastical
cases in one motion. But her attachment is not to any sense of realism inherent in
the teaching case; instead, Flower is actually attempting to cut out the real-life
complexity that many instructors laud case study pedagogy for simulating in
favor of a deductive narrative teaching case that points students in the direction
of using one specific rhetorical strategy to solve a communicative dilemma. In
the sample case she presented in her chapter, Flower implicitly pushes students
to select a strategy of Rogerian argument as a “best solution” to use in solving
the given dilemma. But for the student, being impelled toward a hidden answer
or strategy can often feel like a game of Three Card Monte where, even though
we claim that there is no one right answer, we are shuffling the data and partially
hiding the very thing we expect them to find—all-the-while demanding that they
discover the correct answer to win the grade.
The HBS case method.

To avoid some of the problems associated with artificiality and deductive empiricism in hypothetical cases, some instructors employ teaching cases based on real businesses. This style of teaching case is called the case method approach, which was developed at Harvard College in the 1920s specifically for use in business school education. Case method cases were created for the purpose of spawning a larger class discussion and helping students learn the different field-specific ways of approaching problem solving in business administration (McNair, 1954).

In the field of business communication, Dwight Little has defined case method cases as, “a real life situation presented for the student not entirely photograhically but with a plot. With clues. With animation. Told objectively and in such a way as to insure student involvement” (1971, p. 30). Little goes on to insist that these cases are often written by a researcher who has frequently visited this real-life company that is the source of the case and that “dead cases”—cases that are about past events and not modern-day situations—are of no use for business communication because they lack exigency to our students (1971, p. 30).

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10 Many textbooks have begun including short profiles of real-life companies in each chapter as a way to give the chapter content a more realistic context. Thill and Bovée (2015) and Peter Cardon  Invalid source specified. are notable examples here.
In respect to their organization, these case method cases can go beyond the brevity of detail often found in fictionalized case narratives, as seen in the Casebook Project’s Denny’s restaurant discrimination case (Chin, et al., 1998), but it is not a hard and fast rule in either business communication or the field of business. In the example of the Denny’s case, the narrative is supplemented with a chronology of events, press releases, the public relations documents produced by Flagstar Companies Inc. (the parent company for Denny’s), and a references page with citations for all primary and secondary source material (Chin, et al., 1998). This level of detail and the inclusion of supplemental data outside of the case narrative is not found in all case method cases, however.

Proponents of the case method approach in business communication take different stands on whether the name of the actual company should be disguised or not, just as they do in much of the business school literature. For business schools, disguising the case source is a matter of protecting the company who has just opened their accounting books up for public consumption, as James Culliton explained in his 1954 guide to writing cases. If you are working with a real company or corporation, then protecting their public image is sometimes the only way they will agree to the use of the case. Additionally, in our current historical moment there is another exigency for this disguise. As Melvin Copeland (1954) noted in his history of HBS, many students would try to guess
the name of the company used in the case in hopes of figuring out how they navigated the problem. With the use of the internet and search engines, this problem is heightened for instructors using teaching cases founded on historical events.

As we have seen above, the case method approach in the field of business has a lengthy history of denouncing armchair cases, or hypothetical cases, for their lack of realism. Therefore, the goal of the case method case is to present an actual historical situation from the business world and to have students attempt a solution to the problem, or problems, presented. However, because there is “hopelessness of reaching a definite and unequivocal solution” to the infinite complexity of business problems, the case method is meant to explore problem solving and not to dictate one correct answer, as Arthur Stone Dewing has written in his HBS case method treatise (1954, p. 4). So, realism, as it is construed in the case method approach, is wed to the historicity of the case narrative and its replication of real-world complexity so that students will learn the process of problem solving and decision making. As Malcolm McNair (McNair, 1954) summarized it, there is an art to making a good decision in business, even if we have an incomplete knowledge of the context and the outcome—and the case method is the best way to teach this type of tough-mindedness, as William James called it.
Although many business communication scholars have written in support of using the case method in their curriculum, much of what they cite (or compose) as a sample case method case are actually hypothetical cases. Case method cases are extremely time- and labor-intensive to both create and to deploy in the classroom, and their ends are more directed at unpacking a method of thinking and problem solving instead of producing polished business documents. For this reason, an instructor who uses a case method case with the hopes of having students produce something like a short feasibility study as the case product is working against their own pedagogy. In essence, the instructor is using a method for replicating complexity and spawning inductive decision making while also asking students to produce a polished business document that has sufficiently thought through a host of complex compositional and communicative strategies.

This mode of working against oneself, pedagogically, can be seen in past critiques of the case method in business communication. Lawrence Kingsley (1982) issued a crushing critique of the case method in business communication as a confusing and unclear form of written communication that produces problems of interpretation. Given the examples he cited, Kingsley’s critique was partially correct, but it failed to acknowledge that the ends he wanted the case method to produce were at odds with what the case method’s design. Kingsley’s
critique shows us how we might be asking the case method to operate in
business communication curriculum in other ways than what it was really
created to do: to teach students to make a decision when they do not have all of
the information at hand to do so.

**Research case trends.**

Closely related to the historical realism of the case method approach is the
research case, first popularized in law schools and medical schools. In these
fields, a *case* refers to a particular patient or a legal dispute on historical record
which often relies on prior precedent to guide future action (Little, 1971). As
opposed to other types of cases, however, research cases very infrequently
contain any type of assignment directive to the student about what types of case
products or tasks they are asked to complete at the end of the case. Instead,
research cases leave this application to the instructors, because one case might be
used to illustrate several different facets of the communicative process.

*Illustration* is the key word here as research cases offer a glimpse inside an
organization so that students can see the inner workings of communication in a
company. In this way, research cases operate in the opposite direction of case
method cases because they pull back the curtain to illustrate the decision making
process of a company. They perform a similar function as case method cases in
that they attempt to enculturate students to the decision-making metrics of a
given field, but research cases operate by example, and not by induction.

Although the field of business communication does not currently publish
these types of cases in our journal literature, the use of research cases as teaching
cases might best be exemplified in the 2004 special issue of *IEEE Transactions on
Professional Communication*, edited by Juila Williams and Judith Strother. Much
like the business school case method tradition that maintains fidelity to real-life
cases, the teaching cases in this collection are “descriptions of real world events
that illustrate particular communication problems through collections of primary
documents and secondary materials” (Williams & Strother, 2004, p. 229). Working out of a tradition of research cases in the sciences, these cases are more
illustrative, or descriptive, cases about well-known or influential historical
problems, such as the Challenger and Columbia space shuttle disasters, the
events of 9/11, or various oil spills. While they have a form that resembles
MacNealy’s definition of a research case at the beginning of this chapter, these
case studies are used for teaching purposes, combining an initial narrative of the

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11 Williams and Strother go so far as to decry any “fictional versions of workplace scenarios,”
claiming that they are not recognized as actual cases neither in “the field of technical and
business communication” or in “other disciplines entirely” (2004, p. 230). Unfortunately, in order
to make their claims, they disregard a large body of evidence and they misappropriate Mary Sue
MacNealy’s (1999) distinctions that were cited earlier in this chapter.
secondary discussion about the event, as seen in Meredith Zoetewey and Julie Staggers’s (2004) case about Air Midwest.

Much like Dwight Little’s critique of “dead cases,” Williams and Strother found that their case studies lost appeal once the gap in time widened between the moment of their historical exigence and their use in the classroom. In fact, the impetus for Williams and Strother’s collection of new cases grew out of a particular problem they were experiencing in their classroom: as their cases grew older, their relevance dwindled and their audience was alienated from the content (Williams & Strother, 2004). Their collection contains cases on Enron, the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, the crash of Air Midwest Flight 5481, the Texas A&M bonfire collapse, and nuclear waste leakage at the Davis-Besse Nuclear Power Plant. However, the problem that many readers might notice with these historical cases is that, 11 years after their composition, many of them have already lost their exigence for our students. If historical exigence really is what is most needed for these types of case studies, then the need for a constant supply of modern cases is quite large and time consuming.

Live cases.

As our last major mode of teaching cases used in business communication, we actually return full-circle to some of the very first types of cases used in business school education, which is discussed more in the following chapter.
Live cases, or real-life cases, involve the student not as a fictional protagonist but as an actual participant in a communicative situation with a company or a professional. In order to heighten their sense or realism and provide a more tangible situational context, live cases are not presented to the student, but, rather, are composed by the student herself by being an active participant in the experience.

In one version of live cases, and, in what seems an excessive demand of time and labor, Dwight Little has suggested that a student, “might give sixty hours of his semester course to a social agency to observe its organization while contributing time to the mission of the agency” (1971, p. 34). Students are more likely to be engaged and motivated if they write their own cases from their own experiences, Little argued, and the best teaching cases come from the students’ own first-hand experiences. According to Little, this approach has the boon of creating an “infinite supply” of case material (Little, 1971, p. 34).12

Marilyn Butler (1985) has also used live cases as a salve to correct what she sees as teaching cases’ inability to produce an authentic student identification to the case narrative. For Butler, case pedagogues need to place the student in the middle of an actual situation and let them use their own experiences, because the

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12 Again, textbooks have also employed this use of live cases in their end-of-chapter assignments. The student might be asked to make contact with a real company and conduct research, usually in the form of an interview or a request for information.
real payoff of case study pedagogy is in the, “marshalling of details, planning of organization, accommodating of audience, and selecting of details” that mirrors the process of real-life workplace communication (1985, p. 7). Conceivably, both Little’s and Butler’s approaches involve each student in the course working on a different case at any given moment. And while this approach sounds incredibly time intensive, Butler (1985) insists that it is not (probably since it would require as much preparation and planning as teaching a new case in your course that you haven’t taught before).  

Although neither Little or Butler mention it in their articles, their conception of live cases tap into the very roots of HBS’s case method pedagogy in 1908, which is unpacked more in the following chapter. But what is of interest to us here is that, in contrast to the other styles of teaching cases, live cases elide the need for any argument about their realism or their authentic replication of real-world context and problem solving. The issue of skills transfer or relevancy is a moot point for live cases because Butler and Little are actually advancing internships and workplace collaboration in the place of what is traditionally thought of as case studies. The use of internships in teaching business

13 As anecdotal evidence, I have taught an entire semester with students selecting their own case content and I did not find it any more time intensive than using a new teaching case in my course that required similar preparation and planning.
communication continues to be a prominent pedagogical approach, and it is often pitted against case studies and service learning.

In one version of this argument, Tiffany Bourelle has used Anthony Paré’s work on genre to show that service learning projects do not acculturate students to actual embedded workplace practices (Bourelle, 2012). This argument holds significant merit, but we need to intensify its claim if it is to have any use in our classrooms. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Paré and Smart (1994) warn us that no two performances of genre can ever be the same, whether they are in the classroom or in the workplace. Each community has unique norms and guidelines for genre enactment, but even more, no two performances will be the same even in that embedded community. Therefore, a simple argument for or against internships versus service learning or case studies cannot rely on claims of context or degrees of realism. As we discover in the following chapter, there is another way to think about live cases that business communication can use in the classroom.

As case study pedagogy scholarship blossomed during the 1980s and 1990s, there were several taxonomic distinctions of teaching cases in addition to the spectrum of realism outlined above. These distinctions, which form the two remaining axes of our case study matrix, further help shape our understanding
of teaching cases and ultimately form their definitional boundaries as they currently exist.

**Holistic and Narrative Case Dimensions**

In his 1984 article arguing for the use of teaching cases in writing instruction, Douglas Catron made a distinction between *self-contained* or *holistic* cases and *open-ended* cases. For Catron, as for Flower, the chief question of case study pedagogy is not whether it should be used, but rather, “what structure should case studies take,” and what a case should contain (Catron, 1984). Drawing on an earlier article from 1981 by Barbara Couture and Jone Goldstein, Catron has defined holistic cases as structures where all the relevant information is either explicitly or implicitly provided to students, making the case self-contained and not needing any outside information or research to supplement itself (1984).

Adding to Couture and Goldstein’s distinction, Catron posits the term *open-ended*, where the case does not provide all of the necessary information to the students. Open-ended cases are more common among hypothetical teaching cases, since their fictional nature usually lends itself to an underdeveloped narrative structure. For Patrick Moore (1987), though, this open-endedness is a boon for teaching cases because it mimics the complexity and incompleteness of
real world communicative situations. Open-ended cases force students to discover the rhetorical situation by having them conduct real-life interviews, “which is often what happens on the job,” or by role-playing an interview with the instructor if it is not tenable to work with outside professionals (Moore, 1987, p. 91). To simulate the lack of a pre-given, unified narrative in the workplace, open-ended cases do not assemble information into a narrative, they do not provide all of the information needed to complete the case, and they include as much jargon as possible so that the student must research industry-specific language (Moore, 1987). Moore has insisted that these cases should be dynamic, changing and adapting as the information in the case is modified and as, “new audiences and purposes are introduced into the rhetorical situation” (1987, p. 92).

Moore seems to be referencing a style of non-narrative, open-ended teaching case that was conceptualized a decade earlier by Robert Hays in 1976. Working out of the case problem tradition of the behavioral and medical sciences, Hays outlined a form of open-ended teaching case that is premised on the complete lack of a narrative and a disjunctive list of data. For Hays, a case problem is:

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14 Moore establishes different terminologies for holistic and open-ended cases, calling them cooked and raw cases, respectively. Moore seems to be explicitly pulling his distinctions from Claude Lévi-Strauss’s infamous study of Amerindian mythology of the same name.
a handout of from one to four single-spaced pages. The first paragraph or
two of the handout will tell the students or trainees how to do the
assignment. The rest of the handout will be data – statements of facts,
quotations, lists of figures, short tables, and citations of opinion. These
data should be randomly listed, stated in fragments, and sprinkled with
mechanical errors. (1976, pp. 293-294)

This version of teaching cases cares little for the claim of reality or realness in the
source content that is inherent in definitions like that of Little. Instead, it seeks to
mimic realism in its formalism—its messy, disorganized narrative that makes the
student sift though the content and come to their own evaluation about what is
relevant or irrelevant data, red herring information, or implicit claims that need
to be explored more. Hays’s approach more resembles commonplace books of the
older rhetorical tradition, presenting a cluster of related topical information to
the student without an ordered hierarchy or narrative given to the content. Most
notably, it accentuates the student’s role as detective or investigator trying to
separate the wheat from the chaff.

Both holistic and open-ended teaching case types have drawbacks, as
Catron has noted. Holistic cases can devolve into nothing more than a “treasure
hunt” where students are engaging in close reading but never actually
developing firm analytic or rhetorical skills because they are engaging in a poor
replication of the process of problem solving (Catron, 1984). Patrick Moore has agreed, stating that these types of cases take for granted, “the exact things that business and technical writers spend so much of their time developing in their jobs: the rhetorical situation, the information, and the definitions of technical terms and concepts” (1987, p. 91). Moore has insisted that holistic cases are too unrealistic because they are static instead of dynamic: everything is present in the case that the student needs—its “all there on paper,” he says (1987, p. 92). On the other hand, for Catron (1984), open-ended cases can often result in unreasonable problem solving attempts where, without proper restraints, students will invent details and avoid the problem or principle that the case was designed to teach.

**Narrative cases.**

For Frederic Gale, the issue of a teaching case’s attachment to real life is void; cases, “are not in fact real,” he has told us, “however complex the scenario,” which means that they will always suffer from a lack of “immediacy” for our students (1993, p. 258). For Gale, writing from a legal casebook tradition, the real issue with teaching cases is that, when we assign our students a series of cases throughout the semester that are not related, we are asking them to rotate through a myriad of different subject position which only helps them learn

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15 *The Raw and the Cooked* was also the title of the Fine Young Cannibals’ second album, released in 1988 and also named after Levi-Strauss’s text.
“flexibility,” but any potential pedagogical gain here is undercut by a heightened lack of immediacy to real-world situations (1993, p. 258). Whereas many pedagogues see the negotiation of shifting student subject positions as a beneficial practice in writing and communication instruction—especially in making visible the tacit intersectionality of sex, sexuality, and gender that already always permeate our classrooms (Monson & Rhodes, 2004)—Gale saw this as counterproductive to replicating the demands of the workplace.

The solution to this traditional case method, as Moore has called it, is a unified case method that consists of using a single, extended case throughout an entire casebook instead of using different cases to illustrate different theoretical points. These cases are much longer in length than other teaching case styles, often around 70 or 80 pages, as in Ben Barton and Marthalee Barton’s cases (1981), or comprising an entire book, as with Gale’s cases. Interestingly, the argument for unified teaching cases posits that the complex, contingent nature of discovering information in the workplace is more important to creating a sense of real-world relevancy than the hypothetical nature of its content. The unified case is a common feature of legal casebooks and is also referred to as unfolding cases in medical schools since a patient’s history is revealed over the course of multiple visits, just as it is in real life where complexity builds through compounded interactions (West, Usher, & Delaney, 2012).
Pedagogical Tension Of Case Studies

So what do we get by examining this matrix of case studies inside a genre system framework? As the heart of case study pedagogy, case studies—the texts of the genre system—show us two key things about case study pedagogy in business communications. First, when taken together, this wide set of texts shows that business communication educators have already developed a variety of different case study texts that are tailored to produce different ends in our case study pedagogy. Rhetorical and hypothetical cases produce a much different end than research cases: the former produces set document or speech forms while the latter produces background industry knowledge that can be applied to future problem solving. Although this seems like a self-evident conclusion, the field of business communication is yet to have a dialogue about using different types of cases to produce different desired ends.

Second, this variety of different case study texts show us that these different ends are actually competing views on the utility of the entire genre system of case study pedagogy. In other words, although these texts may be tailored to produce different ends, these ends are at odds with each other. This is most evident when case studies are used as a way to apply on communicative strategy to produce a formulaic business document, such as Flower’s (1981) rhetorical case, versus using a case as a way to teach a field-specific approach to decision
making, like the case method. Instead of eliminating this tension and declaring one end of case study pedagogy more beneficial than another, I argue that we can take a more rhetorical approach by theorizing the multiple ways in which we can use different types of case studies in our pedagogy. This rhetorical approach deviates from HBS’s case method approach, which was used to create one desired end, and allows business communication educators to use case studies for a variety of ends.

This tension between competing ends has a long history in the field of professional and technical communication, which has largely played out as a debate between knowing and doing, or between culture and utility. More importantly, this tension is one that cuts to the very core of business communication pedagogy writ large, and it is one that is worth unpacking.

Linda Flower’s (1981) claim that many of our more “traditional” writing assignments create poor writing habits that become liabilities in the workplace is an apt diagnosis that holds just as much weight today as it did 34 years ago. This need to bridge the workplace and school divide—this need for academia to more appropriately meet the needs of industry—cuts across many disciplines in higher education. Even in fields that humanities scholars often think of as hands-on, applied knowledge fields, like nursing, we find the perennial call for developing a more robust pedagogical attachment to increased student contact with current
industry technologies and practices (Austin & Sonneville, 2013). It is not enough to simply know about the exigencies and behavioral conventions and communicative demands of the workplace, scholars claim; students have to also perform the tasks that will be required of them so that they have working schemas for action and thought.

For the field of business communication, this tension between knowing and doing is most evident in our approach to case study pedagogy, and it taps into the larger discourse about the utility of business communication pedagogy since its very inception in the academy. Teresa Kynell (2000) has articulated this discussion of utility most clearly in her history of technical communication in the early 1900s, and her narrative parallels the development of business communication during the 1900s, as Kate Adams (1993) has shown. In her history of technical communication, Teresa Kynell (2000) has pointed out that when English instructors were brought into engineering departments to teach communication in the 1930s (engineering English), they were not in agreement with engineering faculty over what they were there to teach and how they were to teach it. English instructors began teaching engineering students to respond to literature as a way to train their writing skills, which mirrored the recently established freshman composition programs at Harvard in the early 1900s. However, as engineering faculty pushed back and regained control of their
curriculum, engineering communication was re-conceptualized as a preparation for the workforce through vocational and hands-on training in writing (Kynell, 2000). Kynell has referred to these two differing approaches as a split between culture and utility—between a liberal arts and a vocational education.

In her history of professional communication, Katherine Adams (1993) has also shown how this same culture-utility split occurs in the early 1900s between agriculture, business, and journalism. Although Adams uses a definition of professional communication that many scholars find outdated (due to its inclusion of creative writing in the category of professional), her narrative is instructive for understanding a history of business writing pedagogy. In the early 1900s, Adams (1993) has noted, it was common to have students of agriculture, business, and journalism together in the same professional communication class, but this began to change once these fields realized a need for more hands-on experience. As a result, the field of journalism enlisted practicum programs as ways to replace years-worked-in-the-field experience; agriculture moved its classrooms outdoors; and business communication adopted the Harvard case method as a generalist approach to teaching common business writing modes (Adams, 1993). The pedagogical trajectories of these different programs points to the way that these fields conceptualize themselves as either liberal arts programs, professional schools, or a hybrid form of liberal
arts vocational education. Whereas the field of journalism and agriculture are training students for professional jobs in industry, business communication instructors come from a variety of different disciplinary backgrounds—each of which has different curriculum goals and field-specific identities.

In Kynell’s and Adams’s narratives, case study pedagogy can be read as a sort of Hegelian synthesis that attempted to rectify this split between culture (literature) and utility (vocation) in the early 1900s. Throughout the early 1900s, engineering English instructors surveyed industry executives, asked what skills their industry needed, and then tailored their pedagogy to meet these needs. Based upon their responses—and a growing need for a more industry-relevant pedagogy—case studies began to slowly appear throughout printed textbooks in the 1920s. And once business communication was separated from agriculture and journalism, the practicum component fell out, giving rise to case studies as a way to teach a more “generalist” communication curriculum (Adams, 1993).

Case study pedagogy, in other words, has been at the heart of our field’s attempt to bridge the divide between school and industry, but we have simultaneously employed it as a tool for teaching a more generalist and non-field specific curriculum that reinforced positivist views of language. Kathryn Harris spoke to this exact point when, in 1983, she addressed the need for a more expansive professional communication curriculum across the academy.
Although Harris is speaking to the field of professional communication, her argument is applicable to business communication educators as well. While Harris’s article sets up some problematic distinctions between types of writing (such as technical versus persuasive), her argument presents a common view of language and the utility of communication that is still held in business communication to this day. Speaking to an audience of professional communication scholars, Harris (1983) argued that, since students will inevitably switch careers and industries several times, they gain no benefit from only learning the conventions of agricultural writing, for instance, which is only one species in the genus of professional communication. Instead, the job of a good instructor is to teach the aim of, “the achievement of a clear, economical prose style, consonant with standard English, appropriate to content, audience, and occasion” (Harris, 1983, p. 130). Similarly, in business communication, many educators believe that it is their job to cut across the disciplines of marketing, finance, business administration, and human resources to teach economical, clear, concise prose. Out of a desire to craft a generalist curriculum that is applicable for each major inside of our schools or departments of business, the field of business communication has relied on teaching abstract, generalized
approaches to communication, such as the infamous four C’s: clarity, correctness, conciseness, and credibility.\textsuperscript{16}

Harris’s claims here are not unsurprising given Carloyln Miller’s (1979) infamous analysis of the positivist view of language that has pervaded communication scholarship. Nor is this surprising when we consider Harris’s claims alongside data from the Association for Business Communication showing how disparate the disciplinary homes of business communication instructors are. However, when we couple Harris’s vision of professional communication with concurrent surveys asking industry executives about the demands of workplace communication, it reinforces this call for a general coursework even more. In analyzing the survey data from two studies of industry executives, Elizabeth Tebeaux has noted that:

Business executives’ responses suggest that instructors who give little or no emphasis to such forms [as short and longer reports, instructions, proposals, and evaluations] might wish to reconsider their course content, and that teachers may have to supplement their textbooks with material from other sources.’ In view of these findings, we can draw another conclusion: as Anderson and Storm both state, attempts to separate

\textsuperscript{16}This last “C” is the group, credibility, is often swapped out with another vague principle of communication, but the first three “C’s” usually remain the same across every iteration of the 4 C’s.
students into specialized writing courses according to their major are not justified. (1985, p. 422)

The solution for making a more industry-relevant curriculum for Tebeaux is none other than case study pedagogy. Instructors need to develop case studies that place student writing within an organizational context and asks them to make, “deliberate choices about strategy, style, and tone when they address an audience for a particular purpose,” she wrote (Tebeaux, 1985, p. 424).

Tebeaux’s argument puts case study pedagogy at the heart of this generalist curriculum without ever asking how this pedagogical approach operates or what it produces in the classroom. This is a problem because, as we have seen, different types of case studies produce different ends. In contrast to this, we can look back at HBS and how they created the case method as a field-specific pedagogy that was meant to produce one distinct thing in the classroom: decision making. With all of the complex economic change of transitioning a nation out of agrarianism and into industrialization at the turn of the 1900s, HBS created their case method approach to teach one thing: decision making in the face of unknown outcomes. As a bonus, the case method taught communication principles because students had to argue for their decisions through case write-ups and oral defenses. As Donald David, the third dean of HBS, wrote about the case method:
by emphasis on the process of business decision making, it forces this
needed synthesis of a variety of social disciplines. The student is placed in
the position of the businessman who must act, who must before he acts
weigh the bearing on his problem of a variety of different considerations,
both short-run and long-run in character, but who must in any event
make a decision and implement it. (1954, p. viii)

As these HBS faculty members and administrators saw it, modern-day business
leaders needed to be incredibly interdisciplinary in their knowledge base so that
they could artfully make decisions in the face of uncertainty. In other words,

*communication* was a by-product of the case method but not its primary aim. This
emphasis on problem solving resulted in the case write-up becoming the main
case product in business school case study pedagogy instead of the polished
business documents (e.g., memos, reports, and emails) that our business
communication students are often asked to produce in our own classrooms.

The matrix of case studies presented in this chapter shows us that
business communication educators have developed a wide taxonomy of teaching
cases that can be used for a variety of purposes, so perhaps it is time to be more
rhetorical in our approach to case study pedagogy. If fantastical cases can be
used to focus on modes of writing, like exposition or description, then we can
employ them for that end as well as a wider variety of rhetorical and textual
ends. Or, if we want to emphasize industry and company research through a
detailed analysis of Apple, a case method case or a research case might be the
best resource for our pedagogy.

In addition to selecting the style of teaching cases based upon the ends
that they are tailored to producing, business communication needs to reassess
the work of case study pedagogy to ask what it might produce in a 21st-century
educational setting. Unpacking the matrix of teaching cases reveals the need for
an explicit discussion about the teaching goals that instructors have when they
employ case study pedagogy in their curriculum, and how different styles of
teaching cases are more or less adaptable to those ends. As we have seen, there
are competing uses of case study pedagogy as either an inductive or deductive
empirical method, both of which have competing claims on the utility of the
genre system itself. But is not a question of choosing between competing
conceptions of utility; rather, it is a question of using different case studies to
affect different ends in our case study pedagogy.

Once we can articulate our goals for using a particular style of teaching
case in our curriculum, we can discuss how to gather research and compose
cases based upon these educational goals (e.g., decision making and critical
thinking versus writing well-polished prose for a memo), and then we can
further discuss how we might best use cases in our classroom pedagogy.
CHAPTER THREE

COMPOSING AND DISTRIBUTION PROCESSES

There should be a school for case writing! ~ Dwight Little

In addition to considering the types of case studies available for classroom use, business communication must also consider another aspect of the genre system of case study pedagogy: the various modes of case composition and publication that get those cases into our students’ hands. Each type of case study (e.g., case method case, hypothetical case, rhetorical case) carries different research demands and varying degrees of editorial labor to maintain the case’s relevance as more time passes. Whereas the demands on case-related research and composition may not seem that disparate between some case modes (e.g., research cases and case method cases), this divide widens significantly between other modes (e.g., case scenarios and live cases). By understanding these demands and the history behind certain composition and distribution processes, business communication educators can more efficaciously select the types of cases that suit their curriculum goals, their students’ needs, and their resource or time constraints. And once business communication educators are better
equipped to write and distribute cases, we can begin developing field-specific case studies that fit our unique curricular needs.

Composing a well-crafted teaching case can be difficult, and it requires two processes to be in place: a research and composing process as well as a collection (or storage) process. The complexity of both of these processes determines the value that business communication educators attribute to the entire genre system of case study pedagogy. The storage process might be as simple as an educator saving their self-composed cases to a USB drive and accessing them privately, or as formal as submitting them to a peer-reviewed journal for publication, such as *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly (BPCQ), IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, or Case Studies in Strategic Communication.* The composition process also varies widely because, whereas a hypothetical case requires time to draft and beta test it (as well as the imagination to think it up), live cases require the time to develop relationships with potential executives, to help them uncover a business scenario they could share with the class, and then to devote as much as a three class periods to one case. When both the composition process and the storage process are simple, business communication instructors attribute a lower value to these pedagogical resources.

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17 These last two journals fall outside of business communication, as a field, but I have included them here since many educators pull cases, research, and theoretical approaches from the fields of professional and technical communication.
Contrapositive, when the processes are more complex, instructors attribute a much higher value to these resources.

As the history of Harvard Business School (HBS) has shown, crafting a case method case might possibly demand the most amount of time and resources of any of the case study modes. At the apex of its development, the HBS case method demanded time to perform extensive research and to develop relationships with a company, money to hire research assistants, an editing and revision process prior to publication, money to build a department for housing and collecting cases, and a process for maintaining dossiers on each company that the school partnered with. Because of this particular configuration of resources and time, the HBS case method case was regarded as a serious form of academic scholarship *from its very inception*. Once HBS disbanded their case-writing department and gave faculty full reign over case composition, the administration even recognized this form of scholarship as a type of publication that could count toward a faculty member’s tenure and promotion file. Even today, the publication of a business school case method case is still seen as serious scholarship and a major contribution to business as both the academic field and to industry, writ large. This claim holds as true at Harvard as it does at the Haas School of Business, The Darden School of Business, and the Wharton
School of Business—just to name a few of the many schools who continue this emphasis on case study scholarship.

However, this emphasis on case study composition as a serious mode of scholarship is not reflected in the field of business communication. The reason for this disparity, I argue, is three-fold. First, most of the cases published in our field are hypothetical cases and case scenarios, which require little time to produce and no necessary research agenda. Additionally, these cases are produced as low-quality Microsoft Word documents that lack much design sensibility, which makes them both visually unappealing and dated to an audience of collegiate students. Second, because these cases require so little research or time commitment in comparison with case method cases, I argue that business communication educators view them as low-value teaching resources that offer little to our students other than a contrived scenario that provides a narrative entryway into a formulaic communication activity (e.g., writing a bad news memo or responding to an angry customer). In other words, hypothetical cases and case scenarios offer little to no intrinsic pedagogical value to the consumer—by which I mean both the educator and the student consumer—apart from being a ham-fisted background story used to assign an otherwise unrelated business communication task, such as writing a memo.
The evidence for this second claim lies in the fact that case studies do not sell in our field. Literally, in terms of their monetary value, case studies in business communication are not able to be packaged and sold as course curriculum like they are in other fields. This fact leads to the third reason for case studies’ undervaluation: whether published in a journal that exists behind a paywall, in a textbook, or through another paid resource, these case studies become commodities. And with any commodity, it is necessary to ask what value the consumer invests in the object. Commodification is certainly not used here as a critique of case studies, but I argue that because they exist distinctly as a commodity good, they are judged with even more pedagogical scrutiny. Whereas free resources are harder to sneer at or critique in our field, case studies currently exist as commodities that educators are not interested in paying for.

Alongside the undervaluation of case studies as serious scholarship, our field faces another challenge. Although many business communication scholars claim to be working in the case method tradition, they are not (see Barton, 1981; Kingsley, 1982; Butler, 1985; Moore, 1987; Gale, 1993; and Forman & Rymer, 1999). Instead, these scholars are writing cases that the case method tradition would refer to as hypothetical, armchair cases. This is significant because the intrinsic pedagogical value of the case method is tied to its rigorous processes of composition (allowing it to count towards tenure and promotion) and storage (that
allow it to function as a commodity good that people will pay for). Therefore, our field’s desire to replicate the case library model and to commodify the case study has never been successful because we are producing a much different product for our educators and for our students. To frame this in terms of David Russell’s (1991) distinctions, business communication has tacitly adopted the term case method without replicating the composition processes at Harvard during the 1900s.

Case clearinghouses are innovative ways to alter the distribution model of textbook publishing and they allow the user to download one case instead of a bundled package of cases that might not be utilized in their curriculum. Business communication has tried to replicate Harvard’s collection processes by using the case clearinghouse model of distribution. BPCQ attempted to create an online case clearinghouse in 1998 that derived from the HBS model. For reasons unknown, BPCQ’s online efforts were not successful, and the site went static within a few months of its launch. In other academic fields, such as medicine, nursing, engineering, the physical and hard sciences, education, and theology (to name a few), scholars have made more successful attempts to develop and collect cases through a series of different clearinghouses, or case libraries. Like BPCQ,

\[18\] My efforts to reach out to the editors of BPCQ’s online clearinghouse have been unsuccessful. Although I did get responses, no one was willing to discuss the reasons for the case library’s unsuccessful continuation for this dissertation.
these clearinghouses are also patterned on HBS’s Intercollegiate Case Clearinghouse (ICCH) created in 1959 in conjunction with the Association of American Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

In this respect, HBS’s process of collecting and distributing cases has been replicated in various ways by these fields, although no one field has replicated HBS’s ability to move away from an over-reliance on grant funding and generate self-sustaining revenue that can maintain the publication and distribution of high-quality case studies. Like business communication, these other fields are also largely selling hypothetical case studies through their clearinghouses. They are not producing cases that educators view as high-value resources, and as a result, they are altering HBS’s commodity good without altering their expectations for generating revenue.

In this chapter, I argue that business communication cannot simply mimic Harvard’s composition and distribution efforts and create value in the field for case study pedagogy. Instead, our field must note the unique aspects of HBS’s history that led to its success with case study pedagogy and ask what must be altered in this narrative to situate case study pedagogy for our own unique educational and programmatic goals. Since HBS’s case method legacy is so central to this narrative, I begin this chapter by unpacking the history of how HBS composed and distributed their case method cases. Next, I turn to other
distribution models in the academy to ask how they have attempted to alter Harvard’s model before turning back to business communication’s own case distribution attempts.

This chapter relies heavily on unpacking the story of HBS in great detail before also unpacking case collection models in other sectors of the academy. Gaining a deeper understanding of Harvard’s case distribution history in relation to other fields is important for business communication in four key ways. First, HBS administrators began using live cases as a way to both cut costs and make essential connections to industry executives. By redefining what a case meant for the field of business administration, HBS created a valuable resource that the genre system of case pedagogy hasn’t fully taken advantage of in business communication.

Second, the history of case collection across the academy makes clear that the field of business communication will have to choose whether to create a confederated case clearinghouse between different institutions or allow each institution to create their own library. There are clear benefits and drawbacks for each option, but one of the largest concerns is what types of cases business communication educators would care to access on that platform. For instance, as the hard and physical sciences have shown us, educators are not very interested in using a semi-open case clearinghouse that offers hypothetical cases.
And finally, since we have a physical record of how HBS created an entire program around the case method approach, we can learn the pitfalls and successes they experienced in trying to adapt this specific pedagogy into their field. The early administrators of HBS quickly discovered that the costs and processes for writing cases in business far exceeded those in the law school.

In their history of the first 50 years of business education in America, James Bossard and Frederic Dewhurst (1931) issued a cautionary warning to other business faculty that reproducing the HBS case method approach may not be feasible at other institutions because Harvard College had three major advantages: a highly-selected student body, deep financial resources, and ample dormitories and libraries that fostered free discussion and group collaboration. Only 10 years after the official development of the HBS case method, administrations at other institutions were complaining that case composition was too expensive to pursue on an individual school basis. Instead, these schools would argue, there needed to be a central entity that was responsible for gathering and distributing case studies. That entity would later become the ICCH, which provided the sale of individual cases to schools, both nationally and internationally. Almost 85 years after Bossard and Dewhurst’s evaluation, business communication needs to consider what it actually requires to rigorously produce case method scholarship. In doing so, we can begin to catalog the
compositional, research, and distribution demands of not only the case method, but also other types of case studies.

**A Short History of Case Study Development at HBS**

In the field of business communication, the history of creating the case method at Harvard Business School remains somewhat of a legendary tale. Occasionally, a short one- or two-paragraph history of HBS is offered in articles about case study pedagogy, but more frequently arguments for the pedagogical utility or criteria for good cases are cited from HBS faculty without any acknowledgement of the larger tradition these quotes are embedded in (see Greenwood, 1993; Zhao, 1996). The full story of HBS has been recounted in several different volumes written by faculty, graduates, and administrators between the years of 1931 and 2003 (see McNair, 1954; Copeland M. T., 1958; Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994; Garvin, 2003). While this history is too large to unpack in its entirety here, these texts resoundingly show that the history of the case method is the story of faculty support, research infrastructure, and creative funding channels.19

When HBS was formed in 1908, it was not without serious consternation in the college, writ large. At the turn of the 1900s, business was not an academic

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19 It is important to recognize the internal biases of these texts, as they are largely written to sing the praises of the case method itself. However, McNair’s (1954) history is a very notable exception to presenting only the positive aspects of HBS’s history.
discipline, and, in fact, it was viewed as a vocational trade and a stain on the liberal arts by both academia and the public. As Melvin Copeland, one of the first HBS faculty members and primary chronicler of the school’s history, recounts, “by many professors and by numerous Harvard alumni, it was deemed to be degrading for the University to offer instruction in the venal subject of Business Management” (1958, p. 17). Even though studying commerce was gaining acceptance as a venerable field of study in the early 1900s, which included courses in geography and economic theory, the practice of business administration was seen as a vocational trade that was learned through rough-and-tumble transactions, bootstrapping, and bartering in the real world. If HBS was to be successful, administrators had to overcome a two-prong problem: the public skepticism about designing a curriculum that could outperform on-the-job training and the immense difficulty in actually designing that curriculum.

Under Edwin F. Gay’s guidance, the first dean of HBS, the faculty began developing a field-specific case study pedagogy, and in 1912 he instituted two pedagogical experiments to begin moving in that direction: the use of living cases.

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20 One professor went so far as to say that the pursuit of business, “sull[jied] the robes of Chaucer and Shakespeare with seekers of gold” (Eds. Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994, p. 39).

21 For modern audiences, this view of business might be difficult to comprehend, but imagine what sentiment would be voiced if Harvard announced tomorrow that they will be offering HVAC and plumbing certificate programs in the fall semester: whereas the pursuit of an electrical engineering degree is acceptable at a university, the pursuit of an HVAC certificate is not. This classist divide that exists today between trade schools and liberal arts institutions certainly existed in the early 20th century as well.
and *embryo cases*. The first experiment began as a joint collaboration in 1912 between Dean Gay and A. W. Shaw in order to find a new way to teach Business Policy. Shaw was the publisher of the business magazine *System*, and he joined the Administrative Board at HBS in 1911. Dean Gay was able to convince Shaw to give even more of his time to HBS as a lecturer for the course Business Policy (Copeland M. T., 1954). Since there was no existing business case studies at the time of his hire, Business Policy drew upon about 15 outside businessmen who would come into the class and present *living cases* (also dubbed *walking cases*) for the students (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 71). Specifically, these guest instructors were asked to, “present to the class a problem from their own desk,” which then opened up to a larger classroom question and answer session (Copeland M. T., 1954).

As an example of one living case, Jeffrey Cruikshank (1987) has shown how Shaw asked the president of Sherwin-Williams Paint Company, Walter H. Cottingham, to present on his agenda for an important board meeting that he was attending just following Shaw’s class. For the next class meeting, students were asked to craft a written analysis of the issue that concerned Cottingham’s board along with their own proposed solution, which was then discussed as a class. On their third class meeting, the guest lecturer, here Cottingham, would return to discuss and evaluate the students’ analyses of their real-life issue.
Although Gay and Shaw might have seen these living cases as bridges to a more robust case method approach, live cases did not demand the same research and compositional time constraints. Rather, live cases required time to build relationships with industry executives, and this had the additional benefit of exposing students to potential future employers.

In addition to Shaw’s Business Policy course, Dean Gay’s second pedagogical experiment in 1912 involved the first-year course, Commercial Organization—which would be renamed Marketing two years later (Copeland M. T., 1954). Melvin Copeland was asked to teach a discussion-based section of Commercial Organization alongside a traditional lecture-based section of the course (used as a control group) and to deliver a problem-based midterm and final exam to both sections. This problem-based midterm, or “embryo cases,” as Copeland has called them (1954, p. 28), was comprised of short narrative problems similar to Fredric Abbuhl’s early case scenarios in technical communication and the PBL-based approach to cases in the sciences, as seen in Appendix B.

What is of note in Copeland’s embryo case is that this problem has been written as a hypothetical, which is a hallmark of the problem method: they present scenarios that are not required to have any fidelity to an historical situation in the world. As we saw before, problems can reflect realistic situations,
but they remain proto- or embryo cases for the HBS administration because they are one step removed from any historical record of American business, just as case scenarios and hypothetical cases in business communication. However, the goal of these cases remains the same as the real-life cases that would become the hallmark of the HBS case method approach: they are more concerned with approaches to decision making and problem solving than they are with any actual written or oral analysis of the cases' problems. As President Lowell would later opine in the 1930s, "The great art in life lies less in solving problems than in finding the problems to be solved," which is what this pedagogy was meant to teach (Copeland M. T., 1954, p. 164). Not only was communication a secondary goal to this pedagogy, but so was finding an actual solution to the problem. To many educators, this might sound like a radical curriculum goal, especially in light of the modern statistics-governed field of business that we often encounter in the academy today.

As Copeland has written, “oral and written communication” and “dealing with people” certainly were two of the top four objectives of the founding curriculum at HBS, but they were decidedly trumped by “analyzing business situations” and “the ability to organize” (1958, pp. 124-125). For the field of business communication, this poses a crucial question that must be answered before simply importing the case method approach: is the case method tailor-
made for analysis and organization, or can it be refigured so that the production of written or oral communication is its main goal? In the HBS curriculum, writing was simply one mediation of problem solving and analysis that HBS relied on among others, and it only gained any significant importance as industry executives began complaining about recent HBS graduates’ inability to communicate effectively in writing. As Copeland notes:

employers would accept no alibi. They would not permit the School to throw the blame for faulty training in English back on the colleges or the homes of the students; they took the position that when the School granted a man a degree, it placed its stamp of approval on him, including his use of the English language. (1954, p. 49)

So in 1914, in what Copeland calls the most important development in relation to written composition at HBS, the faculty voted to teach business writing to all first-year students. These students were to produce written reports on case problems every two weeks, which would then be read and critiqued by two faculty members: the instructor and a supplemental English instructor (Copeland M. T., 1958). This development led to the dominance of the case write-up as the primary type of case product produced in the case method approach.

Over the remaining seven years of Dean Gay’s administration, case study pedagogy grew very slowly; however, the heavy emphasis put on written
composition continued during his tenure. With living cases and embryo cases, graduate students were required to write reports and short assignments in conjunction with their classroom discussions, and second-year students were required to complete a short master’s thesis on a current business problem. Initially, the thesis component was of questionable value because the research had not been produced to allow students to make a reasonably informed argument (Copeland M. T., 1958). But another critique of the thesis arose: faculty reported that it was too time consuming to oversee the composition process for their students; as such, it became quite a “heavy burden” (Copeland M. T., 1958, p. 48).

When Wallace Donham took over the deanship in 1919, he continued this emphasis on business communication, while also making a drastic push to develop a case study pedagogy that was germane to business administration. Under Dean Donham’s direction, the Bureau of Business Research began systematically collecting data for case studies, the first business casebook was produced, a case writing course was instituted, and the case method became more fully formed. As a fellow graduate of the Law School, along with Dean Gay and others, Dean Donham was an “enthusiastic believer in the case method of instruction,” (Copeland M. T., 1954, p. 30). Importantly, Donham was not simply an administrator who had worked his way up through the faculty ranks; he had
an illustrious career as a corporate lawyer-turned vice-president of the Old Colony Trust Company in Boston and as a receiver for the Bay State Street Railway Company (Copeland M. T., 1958). This experience shaped the way that he approached curriculum development and administrative decision making at HBS, in ways that were both shrewder and more tied to the public than Dean Gay – who admittedly possessed no business experience at all.

**Research infrastructure.**

To undergird this process of case composition and distribution, HBS needed to create a robust research infrastructure that was both rich in academic labor and rich in financial resources. As the next step towards making historical problems rooted in American economics, HBS created the Bureau of Business Research in 1911, which gathered statistical data from companies (such as operating expenses) and aggregated them into industry indices. The Bureau was initially established by a $2,200 gift from A. W. Shaw, and its purpose was to provide some actual research for this newly burgeoning field of business administration (Copeland M. T., 1954). As we might imagine, most business owners were supremely reluctant to share their financial records and open their management operations to outside scrutiny. As an incentive for business owners to open their books and share their data, the Bureau published a *regular bulletin* that aggregated this collected data together into industry benchmarks and
reports and made it available to the public for a small subscription fee. This data was crucial for many retailers as it helped them establish viable price points, profit margins, and national trend data.

A crucial turn for the case method approach came in December of 1920 when Dean Donham was given a $5,000 gift for “whatever the dean deemed most important” (Copeland M. T., 1954, p. 31). With this money in hand, Donham approached Copeland with the possibility of using the Bureau’s existing report data for designing case studies. With a team of three people, Copeland began collecting cases in industrial and retail store management. In the first 6 months of 1921, Copeland’s team had proven their ability to assemble good cases, so the Dean approved the hiring of first-year students for summer case collection. However, since the task could not be completed in three months, Copeland had to hire additional research assistants for the following semester.

With this initial funding, the Bureau became the internal data mining mechanism to pursue a pedagogy based upon existing American businesses.

The written case studies that the Bureau produced from this data were not only a boon to students, they were also a boon to the very business owners whom the cases were based on, as Andrew Towl (1954), a key HBS faculty

22 Notably, the Bureau was always funded through outside channels in the first 30 years of its operation so that it would not have to draw from internal departmental funds, which were used to pay for operating costs and instructors’ salaries.
member during this period, has argued. Executives and managers gained invaluable insight about their company once they saw an accounting issue or an interpersonal conflict turned into a case narrative by an outside observer. And, as Towl has stated, “When managers have such a record of experience before them, they find a focus for contributions from their individual experience. The issues in the situation come to light. Alternative courses of action appear more clearly” (1954, p. 228). This insight was even valuable enough for General Electric (GE) to pay HBS to compose case studies of GE in 1922, the first in a series of collaborations between the school and industry executives over the coming years (President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2010). For the field of business communication, the potential value of these case method cases as a serious research object beyond the boundary of the classroom might be of interest as a crucial legitimizing tool for our field. As HBS discovered—after their partnership with GE—, the production of these high-value cases provided the grounds for collaboration between HBS and various companies, as well as future sites of executive education and consulting.

Since the Bureau of Business Research was already at work gathering statistical data from business owners used primarily in marketing courses under Dean Gay, when Dean Donham took control of HBS he simply shifted the Bureau’s goal to providing the research and composition of case studies for
broader classroom use. To perform this labor, the Bureau hired case researchers who were current HBS graduate students, recent HBS alumni, and a handful of outside businessmen (Copeland M. T., 1958).\(^\text{23}\) In the early years of data collection, the Bureau targeted small- medium-sized business for case studies because these companies were not as organizationally complicated as larger corporations (Copeland M. T., 1958). As Copeland has told it:

> In this research the cases sought were not the rare, exceptional situations but rather the run-of-the-mine problems. No effort was made to obtain examples of either good or bad practice but rather to present typical problems faced by business administrators in their everyday operations. (1954, p. 32; emphasis added)

Instead of searching out quirky and unique problems in business administration, Copeland’s team established a research agenda for gathering often-encountered problems. Despite trying to gather typical problems and using smaller companies, the Bureau quickly realized that no two business owners kept their accounting books in the same format, which meant that accounting

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\(^\text{23}\) I find it imperative to note that there were no female hires, or graduate students, at this time at HBS, except in administrative assistant positions. in 1954 Harvard finally ratified a decision to make a joint Harvard-Radcliffe program that would keep the women separate but give them the instruction they needed to work in the “top admin positions” in industries, mainly, “staff positions in research and analysis work, in merchandising, public relations, advertising, and publishing, in personnel work, and in some new small enterprises,” as Copeland (1958, p. 132) has written. His research here is based upon a survey that “two competent young women conducted” by interviewing business executives in the early 1950s (Copeland M. T., 1958, p. 132).
practice standards had to be created. But, after the Federal Income Tax Law (ratified in 1913), the rise in taxation during World War I, and the proliferation of profiteering allegations in the late 1910s, business owners had a dire need to keep detailed, accurate books (Copeland M. T., 1958). Executives were searching for guidance to navigate this new bureaucracy, and as more retailers and business owners turned to the Bureau (and their publications), the Bureau quickly gained significant notoriety and credibility among labor unions, industry blocs, and independent retailers. This rise in credibility made it easier for HBS to convince owners and administrators to reveal their accounting books to be used for building case studies and for aggregating important industry data. All of this required an expanded team of research assistants, a discrete system for case collection, and, of course, more funding.

For six years, 1920-1926, the Bureau was tasked with collecting cases and composing them for various courses. Based upon one research assistant’s first-hand account of this process, it was both extremely costly and heavily time consuming. All data collection had to initially be done in person, which meant sending either a professor or a research assistant out to the business. After first contact was made and trust was established, other data could be sent through the mail, but the researcher needed to physically walk the factory or store, to observe the operations and interview the staff, and to figure out if there was really a
better story waiting for them than the one they initially identified as case-worthy. For example, a cotton manufacturer that was initially selected for a case study on their operational expenses might be better suited for a case on managerial communication or inventory control. Or, the manufacturer might be a prime research source for all three topics, in which case the researcher would have to spend more time in the field than expected. In this respect, the researcher was more of a private investigator, scoping out a viable lead in the case. Or as one research assistant has put it, it was like being a television cameraman, “pok[ing] about the business world, picking subjects, choosing views, and bringing them into focus for the inspection of the students” (Fayerweather, 1954, p. 270).

According to several early researchers and professors, there was a three-part system every researcher had to follow when composing a case. First, since cases were always produced for a specific course, the researcher needed to interview the instructor and figure out all of the possible data points that might be of use to them in a potential case (Fayerweather, 1954). For instance, a marketing professor might tell the researcher to be on the lookout for information related to pricing, operating expenses, inventory control, and advertising strategy. In addition, as James Culliton (1954), Assistant Director of Research at HBS in the 1930s notes, prior to any interviews they conducted, the researcher must thoroughly educate themselves about the company, their
employees (including any possible HBS alumni), published documents (e.g.,
trade journals policies and company financial reports), key industry news and
developments, and any relevant topics that might feed into a line of questioning.

Next, once the interviewer arrived at the company, it was imperative to
explain all of the school’s collection policies before pursuing an exhaustive line of
questioning. These policies were supposedly easier to explain if the researcher
brought a previously-written case with them so that executives could see exactly
how their company might be represented (Culliton, 1954). Field research also
required one to be on the lookout for any other case topics that could be present,
which meant keenly observing every piece of minutia and looking for seemingly
irrelevant information. For instance, one researcher suggests recording whether
the office is neat or gaudy, whether the executive seems disinterested, if he is
constantly interrupted, if his secretary is efficient, and the physical location of the
plant in relation to the rest of the town (Culliton, 1954). Since a business selected
for a production case might be more fruitful for a management case, it was
imperative to have a full notebook of observations to draw upon (Culliton, 1954).

In the final stage of case collection, there was a precise process for
reporting your interview data to the school upon your return and for composing
the case document. Once the Bureau expanded so much that case collection was
forced to decentralize in 1926, it was imperative to create contact slips for each
company and executive visited so that companies weren’t contacted multiple times without good reason. These contact slips were signed and dated by each researcher and kept with the interview notes so that they formed a sort of dossier that was mandatory to read by any fellow researcher before constructing another case on the same company (or updating case information) (Culliton, 1954). After creating a contact slip, numbering the dossier, and entering it into the database, the researcher could begin composing the actual case document. However, the researcher needed to keep all confidentiality agreements secure by redacting names and disguising the case source—the company—by redacting all key information.

This process of dossier maintenance was essential because almost every case required written approval by the company before it could be authorized, edited by the professor, and included in the case database. Maintaining a collection of dossiers in this system worked fine, as long as HBS had a corner on the market and was the only business school reaching out to companies for case study fodder. However, we can imagine the problems that this collection process would engender nowadays if two, three, or even four business schools were simultaneously reaching out to Apple for data collection. When more than one school or program has a collection agenda, there is a built-in problem of “getting to the client first” that has to be rethought, especially as a field like business
communication might be trying to weigh the benefits of creating a field-wide, confederated case clearinghouse or whether each program should maintain their own case library.

The early literature on HBS case collection does not explicitly talk about the composition process itself, except for the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of companies and individual executives, as well as the importance of maintaining an objective stance to the data. James Culliton’s (1954) essay on case collection, however, is an exception here. Culliton spends time giving his readers some tried-and-true composition tips that range from creating a pre-writing outline to explaining the bureaucratic process for publication approval. Many of these tips are procedural in nature (e.g., disguising company data, using exhibits, appendices and tabulations, double checking all the facts), but there are also some grammatical tips here (Culliton, 1954). Much like APA verb tense recommendations, Culliton suggests using the past tense so that cases retain their “usefulness for teaching longer than cases in the present tense,” and translating all numerical data into tables, which can help students visualize the data and make it simpler to find (1954, p. 266). He also suggests using the first paragraph of the case to present the “theme of the cases, an issue (real or nominal), or some other ‘excuse’ for writing the case, against which the rest of the material can be interpreted” (Culliton, 1954, p. 266). Even in diagnostic cases,
he wrote, where there is not one clear-cut issue or problem that the student must solve, the inclusion of a theme or a focal point is meant to increase the reader’s interest and avoid the mistake of writing a case as simply “memoranda merely relating interesting facts” (Culliton, 1954, p. 266).

Understandably, this entire process of research and composition required a significant amount of time; as a result, case collection was slow at first due to the small amount of hired research assistants. Not only was there lag time between the interviews and the case composition, there was also a lag between the composition and the review process, much as there is in the traditional journal publication review process. Since the researcher was composing the case for a specific professor and a specific course, there was a considerable revision process until the case was suitable for student use. However, as Andrew Towl (1954) has reported it, the Bureau must have hit their stride because they produced 8,000 cases during the 1920s. Subtracting for federal holidays and weekends in the year 2015, this is equivalent to producing 3.19 cases per work day—a grueling pace, even with a large research staff and a large faculty to be passing revisions back-and-forth with.

While it is impossible to pin down an exact cost calculation for each case produced by the Bureau in these early years, we have access to some hard numbers gathered from HBS’s end-of-year fiscal reporting. In 1920-1921, for
instance, the Bureau spent $5,000 on case collection, which is equivalent to $59,184 as adjusted for the year 2014 (Tully Jr, 1954). But this number greatly fluctuated based upon the pitfalls the researchers ran into or the ability to use one company’s information for more than one case. For example, for the years 1924-1925, case collection cost $139,000, or just shy of $2,000,000 as adjusted for the year 2014 (Tully Jr, 1954). And for the next 12 years, collection costs ranged from $75,000 to $125,000 annually – totaling a whopping $5,000,000 (not in adjusted monies) over the first 30 years of operation (Tully Jr, 1954). To average this out, the cost of a single case per year fluctuated between $20, $52, $276, and so on, based on the year. Tully (1954) even notes that certain complex cases for human relations and business policy cost between $1,000 and $2,000 to compose during those years.

This issue of case cost is a particularly important part of the HBS narrative for business communication scholars, because we can cut our learning curve in half by understanding the pitfalls that HBS underwent in launching their case method approach. The expenses incurred by Dean Donham were justified, in his rationale, because his collection agenda was grounded in producing “timeless cases” that could be used over and over throughout the years (Tully Jr, 1954, p. 278). However, this agenda soon proved unrealistic. As business methods changed and the data grew the patina of time, cases needed to be either updated
or discarded constantly, which required more labor and more money; the research machine needed to be constantly recursive to stay relevant. As Dean Donham stated in his 1938 Annual Report, these expenses were mistakenly calculated by inferring that case collection would be analogous to curriculum development in law schools (Tully Jr, 1954). What Dean Donham failed to account for was that law libraries already contained thousands of legal case briefs, so their only curriculum cost was in compiling casebooks and retraining faculty for leading discussion-based classrooms.

**Collecting and publishing cases.**

Between the different revenue streams of outside funding for case research at Harvard, the sale of teaching cases, and workshop revenue, HBS created a unique global academic model for funding the research and publication of teaching cases in the academy. As he set the Bureau in motion gathering research in the early winter of 1920, Dean Donham concurrently took a two-part approach to publishing these cases: creating the first business casebook and publishing individual cases in *Harvard Business Reports*. Drawing upon the previous embryo cases that he had been using, Donham immediately tasked Melvin Copeland with writing the very first business casebook in 1920. Without a clear-cut direction in how to compose these cases, he cobbled them together from a variety of different sources:
I put the ‘problems’ together from situations which I had encountered in our research work, from situations that had been reported in business publications and other sources, from experiences that had come to my attention during my wartime work in Washington, and from a few new business contacts. Many of the ‘problems’ were dictated to the class for discussion at subsequent sessions and thus tried out in advance of publication. (Copeland M. T., 1958, p. 75)

However, in what turned out to be a very influential decision, Copeland decided to publish his casebook with a national educational publisher instead of through the internal Harvard publishing branch of the college. This publisher pushed for keys to be included with each case, which acted as guides for the teacher on how to use the case, what important issues the educator should draw out, and optional questions that could be posed to students (Copeland M. T., 1958). In other words, these keys would function like problem-solving and decision-making roadmaps for instructors instead of letting them read through the case independently and identifying sources of conflict, tricky problems in the case, and avenues for possible responses.

Although Copeland has insisted that he was emphatically against the inclusion of keys, he yielded to the publisher and created a new genre convention in case composition that would later be adopted by other fields: the
inclusion of an aid showing instructors how to properly analyze and use a specific teaching case. Attempting to evade the normative nature of such an instructional aide, Copeland tried to design these keys to act as exploratory mapping tools—simply identifying several key issues of the case for the instructor—but many people used it as if it was a legend to all of the most important factors in a case instead of as a tool that laid the initial groundwork for further exploration (Copeland M. T., 1958). Later, once HBS began publishing their own teaching cases apart from external publishers, they kept this concept of a key and re-titled them teaching notes, which are now a common element of case studies across a variety of disciplines.

In addition to this external textbook publishing outlet, Dean Donham also began publishing individual cases in Harvard Business Reports in 1925-1932, which was available to the public for a subscription fee (Towl, The Use of Cases for Research, 1954). These monies helped fund case research for the Bureau until 1926 when case collection was decentralized from the Bureau and faculty were allowed to research and compose cases on their own. Once case research was decentralized from the Bureau and placed into the hands of HBS faculty, the administration recognized the amount of serious scholarship and research that was involved in the case method and they began counting case study publication towards tenure and promotion requirements (Copeland M. T., 1958). One
hundred forty-eight cases were published in Harvard Business Reports in seven years, but since cases were not as widely used by the public at that time as the administration had hoped, HBS began a new publishing agenda in 1932. In this new agenda, HBS published several types of print collections: volumes of casebooks with commentaries, histories of individual companies, and voluminous collections on issues such as the effects of taxation on business decisions (Towl, The Use of Cases for Research, 1954). This multi-pronged publishing agenda continued into the 1950s when the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) presented HBS with an opportunity for a joint publication venue.

In 1956, the AACSB wanted to start a journal for the dissemination of curriculum, long-range trends in business, and general items of business education (e.g., newly designed classrooms, case studies, and movies) (Dirkson & Lockley, 1966). The Executive Committee of the AACSB, “decided at this time to request the Harvard Graduate School of Business to set up a clearinghouse for teaching and case materials” (Dirkson & Lockley, 1966, p. 227). With a $120,000 grant in hand from the Ford Foundation, the AACSB funded the Intercollegiate Case Clearinghouse (ICCH) at HBS for a three-year trial basis, and the Executive Committee acted as the clearing house’s advisory board on all matters of general policy (Dirkson & Lockley, 1966).
The cases provided through the ICCH were written by various business schools (not just HBS) and sold to educators across the world, providing a new visibility to the case method approach across a variety of disciplines and in a variety of countries. By 1963, the ICCH had sold $107,000 in mimeographed cases and reached their breakeven point (President & Fellows of Harvard College, 2010). Since the widespread circulation and sale of these cases grew to $154,000 the very next year in 1964 (a 44% increase in sales), the ICCH uncoupled itself from grant funding and became a self-supporting entity that was endorsed by its national organization (Towl, 1973). In addition to collecting and selling teaching cases internationally, the ICCH also held annual workshops that taught educators how to compose a well-wrought case method case—as well as how to use them in the classroom (Towl, 1973).

Although information about case collection through the ICCH after the 1970s is hard to find, HBS’s online historical timeline tells us that by 1977 cases written by HBS faculty accounted for 88% of all case sales, which led to HBS discontinuing their role maintaining the ICCH in 1983 (President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2010). As HBS branched out on their own, independent of other schools and the ICCH, the clearinghouse model gained significant popularity in other business schools during the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, a host of business school clearinghouses popped up in America and abroad. For
instance, the Case Clearinghouse of Great Britain and Ireland was established in 1973 as a joint effort among higher education business schools in the United Kingdom (The Case Centre, 2015). Renamed the European Case Clearing House (ECCH) in 1991, and then The Case Centre in 2013, this organization now holds 51,000 cases (many of which are cases written by HBS faculty) offered through a second-party vendor, and sells them for either $4.35 or $5.25 for members or non-members, respectively.

Today, well over 30 different clearinghouses exist to purchase business school cases, but the majority of all of these cases are still written and published by HBS and offered through these second-party vendors.24 Presently, as of 2014, HBS has posted annual sales of 11,991,870 cases; 1,980,542 books published by Harvard Business Press; 292,954 subscriptions to Harvard Business Review (their monthly magazine); and an impressive 3,312,578 reprints of HBR (President & Fellows of Harvard College, 2014). This publishing arm of HBS’s revenue stream accounted for $194,000,000 in 2014, or 31% of HBS’s total annual revenue, according to their published statement of activities and cash flow (President & Fellows of Harvard College, 2014).25

24 The more popular of these clearinghouses are ran by the Richard Ivey School of Business, the Stanford Graduate School of Business, the Darden School of Business, the Thunderbird School of Global Management, and the Haas School of Management.
25 This figure needs to be adjusted according to the $71,000,000 expense of publishing and printing in order to gain a more accurate understanding of net profit gained. However, since HBS
Case Collection Across the Academy

In order to understand business communication’s approach to case composition and distribution, it is helpful to first look at how other academic disciplines have attempted to alter HBS’s case collection and composition approach. Unfortunately, we know little about the composition process because, like business communication, there is not a body of literature that discusses the actual case writing process. However, we can examine the collection process by looking at the structure and the case offerings at different case clearinghouses in these various fields. By looking at these clearinghouses, it quickly becomes evident that none of these libraries are able to generate enough revenue to produce cases that educators are willing to purchase. This is an important observation because, while revenue generation should not be the primary objective of case collection and distribution, if business communication wishes to maintain a high-value collection of desirable teaching cases, that clearinghouse has to be able to produce the financial conditions for its own existence. As we see across the academy, the best chance for producing a desirable clearinghouse includes putting effort into the design of both the database and the cases, as well as producing high-quality research-based cases.

lumps case publication in with book and magazine publishing, no precise figure can be obtained for their teaching cases, all of which are offered online only, not in print.
Across the academy, broadly, case collection and distribution looks very different than the moneyed legacy of Harvard College. Many fields employ the concept of a case study clearing house, but they are producing a different product other than case method cases, and they are altering the business school distribution model. Examining these changes to HBS’s distribution model can help business communication scholars to find a field-specific model for distributing cases, as well as seeing what types of cases are of value to our students and our industry partners.

In American higher education, there are currently three institutional distribution channels for case studies: textbooks, journal publication and clearinghouses.26 Textbook publishing is the most popular publication route across higher education, but as we have seen through Melvin Copeland’s narrative, working with a national publishing house means meeting certain demands for providing case study keys (also known as teaching notes) and also forcing students to purchase an entire book, which an educator may or may not wish to assign for the course. Journals like BPCQ and IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication (IEEE Transactions) technically offer their cases for free, but they exist behind a paywall. As long as an educator has access to an

26 By institutional channels, I am referring only to outlets sponsored by professional organizations, schools, or programs; these do not include instructors who compose cases individually and do not distribute them for widespread use.
institutional license, they can download these cases to use in their classroom and the cost is passed on to the institution’s library operating budget. Both journals and textbooks, then, conceptualize the case study as a commodity that is sold to the student (the end user) either directly (i.e., the sale of a new textbook) or indirectly (i.e., diffracted through an institutional license that the student pays for in assumed tuition costs).²⁷

Clearinghouses, as they exist outside of business schools, represent the only current option for altering the publishing industry’s conception of a case study as a commodified unit sold directly or indirectly to the student.²⁸ Unlike business school case clearinghouses that are behind a strict paywall, many academic fields offer their case materials for free through either open access or semi-open access journals and clearinghouses. Open access channels, such as the University of South Florida’s Clearinghouse for Special Education Teaching

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²⁷ Anecdotally, I have often encountered educators that refuse to use older editions of textbooks because they falsely believe that this money is still channeling back to the publisher. This is not true, and the resale market for textbooks is a large part of the exigence for continuously updated editions of texts.

²⁸ A possible argument exists that even case clearinghouses that are completely open access and do not take in external revenue are still built on indirect costs to students. For instance, if a clearinghouse is co-funded by grants from an academic professional organization, and if those grant monies are provided through membership fees, then the schools that pay for their educators’ membership fees are using funds supplied by student tuition. However, this argument would rely on university fund allocation and budget financing, which is well outside the scope of this project.
Cases\textsuperscript{29} and the University of Pittsburgh’s School of Medicine’s Department of Pathology case index,\textsuperscript{30} do not generate any revenue; instead, they are funded through donations, grants, and faculty or staff volunteerism. In many cases, clearinghouses are co-funded with support from a national organization that governs the discipline, such as the Association of Business Communication’s funding of the BPCQ Casebook Project. What is important to note is that open access cases rely solely on volunteerism and recurrent grant funding. Once the funding channel dries up, or once the volunteer editors and designers step down, these case libraries can quickly go dormant. For online case libraries, the most optimistic scenario is that the servers still host the site, but that the site goes static, or unmaintained (such as USF’s Clearinghouse for Special Education Teaching Cases). The worst scenario is that servers are shut down, links to case studies and related materials are broken, and the content becomes inaccessible to the public.

In distinction to the open access model, semi-open access clearinghouses have found a way to slightly alter Harvard’s fiscal model and maintain a flow of external capital. The most impressive of these—and the most prominent—is The

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\textsuperscript{29} Accessible at http://cases.coedu.usf.edu/default.htm, as of August, 2015.
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\textsuperscript{30} Accessible at http://path.upmc.edu/cases.html as of August, 2015.
\end{itemize}
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National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science (NCCSTS),31 which was begun in 1999. Housed on the University of Buffalo’s servers, the NCCSTS offers over 500 cases in a variety of scientific disciplines for high school, undergraduate, and graduate education. With a team of in-house copy editors and web developers, peer reviewers, and a full editorial staff, the NCCSTS is the most professional-grade clearinghouse outside of schools of business in higher education. While the actual teaching cases are offered for free, educators must pay a $25 annual membership fee to access the teaching notes (which are supplied for every case) and answer keys (which are supplied for cases that have a multiple choice question component to them). As with Harvard’s clearinghouse, the registered user must be verified as an instructor who is employed with an institution in order to gain access to teaching notes and answer keys.

As of now, the NCCSTS clearinghouse is not financially independent through the sale of annual memberships; instead, they rely on an influx of grant funding to remain in operation, just as the ICCH did when it was first started by the AACSB at Harvard. As the NCCSTS has noted, their research, composition, and clearinghouse distribution channel, “has been generously supported by the National Science Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and the U.S.

31 Accessible at www.sciencecases.lib.buffalo.edu, as of August, 2015.
Department of Education” (National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science, 2016). Unlike many prominent open access clearinghouses that do not collect any revenue, the NCCSTS has put significant time and effort into building a professional-grade web platform and consistent formatting template for each teaching case, as seen in the case “Oh, What a Difference A Carbon Can Make” (Chitester & Tallmadge, 2012). Instead of relying on a pared down HTML frameset database, the NCCSTS has smartly recognized that they cannot charge educators for an inconsistent product that lacks the value-added elements of a high quality content management system (CMS) and sleek document design. However, as any experienced managing editor knows, good design costs money. The problem for most clearinghouses, like most academic journals, is that it is nearly impossible to sustain the costs of constant web maintenance and design unless an organization can secure recurring funding or sell enough subscriptions to reach a break-even debt to income ratio.

**Types of case studies offered at various clearinghouses.**

One major difference between the HBS case distribution model and semi- or fully-open access clearinghouses in other disciplines is that these other clearinghouses largely offer their readers hypothetical cases. Since we have seen that hypothetical cases do not incur the same research and collection infrastructure as case method cases, the financial needs for publishing these cases
are different. For instance, looking at Chitester and Tallmadge’s (2012) case, we can see that it is not premised on the inductive empirical model of the case method approach, which eliminates the need for an extensive research budget. This chemistry case is an apt example of hypothetical cases across a variety of fields: they present a concept or theory to the student and then show how it functions in practice, just as in Linda Flower’s (1981) rhetorical case model presented in the last chapter. When this type of teaching case is employed, it can be produced at a minimal cost and in a shorter time period. The same is true for hypothetical cases in a variety of fields, including hypothetical cases produced by Harvard Medical School, as John Yee and Kelly Fuksa’s (2002) case demonstrates.

Hypothetical cases, as found in all of the clearinghouses listed above, pose a serious risk for these clearinghouses. Because hypothetical cases are low-value curriculum resources, no clearinghouses rely on their sale to generate revenue. The ostensible accessibility of drafting a good narrative makes these armchair cases both popular and easy to replicate, but still low value as compared to research and case method cases.

Revenue generation should not be valued as the primary goal of case study distribution. However, since open access case libraries are too prone to failure due to a lack of sustainable funding, thinking through a model of case
distribution that creates the conditions of its own recurring funding is essential if we want to pursue a clearinghouse model in business communication. Using the ICCH and the NCCSTS as case studies here, educators will not purchase a curriculum resource that they could easily copy and produce themselves in a short window of time (and without any overhead expense besides desktop publishing software).\(^\text{32}\) Whereas the ICCH was able to generate enough funding to cover its own operating expenses in just eight years, the NCCSTS has been in operation for 16 years and has still not reached a break-even point through the sale of teaching notes and answer keys. The reason for this difference, I argue, is largely due to the types of case studies that non-business school clearinghouses are providing. A major drawback of the NCCSTS clearinghouse is that their cases are not high-value resources that can also teach students about major historical developments in the history of the field. For instance, in a recently well-circulated NCCSTS case on hydrofracking, the students are presented with a brief visual that explains the hydrofracking practice, but they do not gain any perspective on the history of this practice, major news stories that show its effects, or any understanding of public backlash against it (Larrousse, 2014). As it stands, this case study could be used to replace a textbook chapter on what

\(^{32}\) The acceptance of granting funding from the NSF and other federal programs might also prohibit the sale of these cases for any financial gain. If this conflict of interests exists, it is another roadblock for any clearinghouse that wants to pursue the option of self-sustaining revenue generation.
hydrofracking is, as a practice, but it would have to be supplemented with additional outside materials to be effectual as a teaching unit.

**Case Collection in Business Communication**

This extended narrative looking at case composition and distribution across the academy shows us that, in the genre system of case pedagogy, business communication has not yet had an explicit conversation about case composition and distribution infrastructures. It also shows us that business communication has to overcome three very serious obstacles before deciding which modes of case studies we want to use in our classrooms and how we will make those cases accessible to other educators. These obstacles include employing live cases in our curriculum, weighing the pros and cons of a confederated case clearinghouse, and addressing the funding requirements that lie at the heart of composing cases as serious scholarship.

First, as HBS was quick to find, live cases can lower the cost of case design while also making invaluable connections between programs and industry executives. In a strikingly shrewd maneuver, HBS made partnerships with local business professionals in order to utilize them for live cases, to provide post-graduation employment options for their students, to hire them as part-time instructors, and to bring them in as donors and advisory members of the school. Building such strategic relationships with the private sector proved to be an
incredibly important first step for HBS that arguably helped provide funding for their future case research efforts. Over 100 years later, bringing business executives into the classroom to talk through live cases is still a large selling point in HBS’s marketing materials.

In a recent *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* article, Liberty Kohn (2015) has argued that an increased interaction between academic programs and industry professionals can create a better understanding of workplace demands and subsequently decrease the need for extensive on-the-job training. Having a more explicit relationship with specific industries and professionals creates a feedback loop where employers can articulate their needs to academic programs—and in return, academic programs can aid executives by exposing them to best practices and to new developments in communication theory. One way to deliver these insights, as HBS found, might be through a journal subscription sold to executives. A journal of this type may or may not include in-depth case method and research cases that provide executives with an historical understanding of best practices or new theories put to action.

33 I also argue that HBS set the institutional precedent for hiring a majority of their faculty as part-time instructors to provide the majority of teaching, which kept their salary cost very low. For academic scholars who are concerned about current institutional hiring trends, this aspect of HBS’s founding is a fruitful area of inquiry to identify where the current hiring trends of the arts and sciences might be headed. I unpack this argument more in the final chapter of this dissertation.
Second, except for BPCQ’s attempt at an open access case clearing house, the distribution of teaching cases in business communication remains the domain of journal and textbook publication. If our field wants to pursue case study pedagogy as an important pedagogical driver in business communication, then we need to establish a way to distribute cases internationally. To date, BPCQ’s online clearinghouse remains the only attempt to collect and distribute cases in business communication. As part of their 1998 Casebook Project, BPCQ’s online clearinghouse was established to create a national, interactive website where educators could access and post sample student responses, teaching notes, and commentary on student work (Rea, 1998).³⁴ BPCQ kept their actual cases behind a journal paywall, attempting to sell the case but give the supplemental material away at no cost (while also creating a vibrant online public discourse about each case). Within five months of the Casebook Project’s publication, the website had gone static, the hyperlinks remained broken, and the site fell into disuse.

When taken in concert with other distribution models from Harvard and the NCCSTS, the story of BPCQ’s clearinghouse provides additional insight into what types of case studies and resources educators want. Most importantly, Harvard’s success in moving away from textbook and monograph publications and into a single-case distribution model provides new options for curriculum

design in business communication. Textbook manufacturers love the distribution vehicle of the bound book because it allows for multiple editions, creating built-in demand by the very nature of its ephemeral utility. To remain relevant, books must be updated, which creates an endless cycle of outdated editions. However, when educators can choose individual cases to purchase for their course, we can reduce publishing costs while also reducing the consumer’s costs. The result of utilizing the for-profit case clearinghouse model at HBS is that it has helped fund the production of serious case study scholarship while also generating excess revenue for the school’s operating budget.

While revenue generation should not the prime motivator for case pedagogues, we cannot ignore the economics of scholarship production: good research takes time and money, and outside of budgetary allowances, funding has to come from either contingent sources (e.g., grant funding and donations) or outside funding channels (e.g., the sale of materials or services). The need for generating revenue that can sustain the very management of the clearinghouse should not cause us to regard it as a romp through the forest of filthy lucre, especially since a large number of business communication courses currently rely on custom textbooks from large publishers.

However, there is an additional problem for our field if we decide to build a clearinghouse. As we encountered earlier with the example of Apple, there is a
problem of “getting to the client first” when more than one school or program is producing case method or research case studies. One option is for business communication programs to all pursue a confederated clearinghouse, like the ICCH or the NCCSTS, coming together under the banner of a national organization such as the Association for Business Communication (ABC). The other option is to privatize each clearinghouse and let programs produce their own case materials, like HBS and other business schools presently do. As the two options currently exist, privatization generates additional funding for individual programs whereas confederation brings everyone (and all the monies) into a central agency or national organization. One possible strong argument against moving to either of these models is that bypassing textbook publishers means that authors will no longer receive royalties for their book publications. However, if authors are concerned about payment, this is a false choice scenario. Clearinghouse models do not necessitate ceding payment for scholarship, even though no clearinghouses currently pay authors for their work. Building a clearinghouse model based on author royalties is easy to imagine, and rethinking this revenue model might actually stimulate more—and possibly better—case scholarship for our field.

Third, and most importantly, there is no need for business communication to reinvent the wheel of case study pedagogy. At this point, it might be helpful to
recall the criticism of the case method voiced by Bossard and Dewhurst. Are Bossard and Dewhurst correct; is the case method too costly to reproduce at other institutions? For the field of business communication, the answer is partly yes and partly no. Since no one program in our field has the massive financial surplus necessary to build a case composition and distribution infrastructure from scratch, it is too costly. Nevertheless, as we have seen, we cannot take HBS’s field-specific case method and simply insert it into business communication. Harvard’s first mistake in developing the case method was to miscalculate the cost and the time commitment of producing a single case; their learning curve was high. With over 140 years of case study development across the academy at our fingertips, business communication scholars should be able to anticipate some of the financial responsibilities of producing case research and cut our own learning curve in half. We have seen how high the costs of using the case method can soar, and we have seen how low the overhead of producing hypothetical cases can sink. However, these two modes of case studies are not the only ones available to us. Each educator, department, or program can select the type of case study that fits their unique curriculum and budgetary needs without hamstringing themselves into tacitly accepting HBS’s case study pedagogy.
Harvard’s model is a high-risk-high-reward proposition where the funding requirements for case composition and distribution are correlative to producing serious scholarship that is useful for both our students and for industry executive. At the end of the day, we can innovate the ways in which we research, compose, and distribute cases, but if instructors are not trained to implement case study pedagogy, then a case study will have little benefit in training our students. To better understand how case study pedagogy has been used in our field, the next chapter shows how educators go from purchasing cases to using them in the classroom.
CHAPTER FOUR

CLASSROOM PRACTICES

We are trying to teach public language. ~ Todd D. Rakoff

Now that we have unpacked the different types of cases that exist in business communication—and how those cases are collected and distributed—we need to understand how our field uses case studies in their classrooms. Looking at how business communication educators use cases as a genre of classroom practices inside the larger genre system of case study pedagogy reveals how heavily our field relies on discussion-based pedagogical practices. Without exaggeration, every journal article and book chapter written about case study pedagogy over the last 50 years begins with the tacit assumption that discussion-based classrooms are the best way to analyze case studies with students. Although business communication scholars offer a myriad of different arguments as to what makes discussion a preferred type of classroom practice, all of them write as if the notion of the case study is synonymous with a discussion-based classroom. Discussion is the de facto pedagogy for case study analysis because business communication educators have tacitly adopted HBS’s classroom practices used with the case method without asking what those classroom practices...
practices are meant to produce. Examining the genre of classroom practices in business communication reveals that our field has a much deeper attachment to product-oriented instead of process-oriented pedagogies than we might have realized.

In order to investigate this genre of classroom practices, we must first return back to Harvard Business School to the development of the Socratic. Through this narrative, we might learn what this classroom practice was meant to create when used with case method cases. The Socratic method is a form of discussion-based pedagogy developed specifically for case method cases at Harvard (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, Introduction, 1994a). The method was developed by Charles Langdell at Harvard Law School (HLS) in 1870 and instituted as the sole pedagogical mode at Harvard Business School (HBS) in the 1920s (Garvin, 2003). As the use of case studies spread to other fields throughout the mid-twentieth century, so did the use of the Socratic method as the preferred mode of case study pedagogy. In business communication, specifically, the Socratic method has been referenced in journals and texts more than any other specific pedagogical approach.

Although the Socratic method is often cited in our field’s literature, it is unclear how many educators actually use this method in their classrooms. While the method is mentioned in passing reference quite frequently, much like case
method cases, there are very few pieces of business communication scholarship that actually explore how they use the Socratic method in the classroom. Based on the few articles and book chapters that do explain how they employ discussion in the classroom, we find that these pedagogies widely deviate from the Socratic method in order to meet the field-specific needs of business communication instructors. Therefore, it is more accurate to refer to this collection of pedagogies as *discussion-based* classroom practices instead of referencing them as the Socratic method. What is striking about this genre of discussion-based pedagogies in business communication is that the explanation of how to enact these pedagogies often runs counter to the pedagogical benefits that educators assert about them. For instance, like HBS’s conceptualization of the Socratic method, business communication scholars have argued that discussion-based pedagogy, *writ large*, is a way to democratize the classroom into a participatory environment where the teacher is an anti-authoritative pedagogical force (Rogers & Rymer, 1998). This is interesting because the radical value behind the Socratic method is that it locates pedagogical value not in the *actual analysis* that students produce, but rather in the *reading* and *interpretive (or decision-making) process* of discussion that allows students to understand communication and problem solving as contextual practices without right or wrong answers (DiGaetani, 1989). However, the major *drawback* of the
discussion-based pedagogies offered in our field is that they operate
contrapositive to their own claims by showing a greater concern for product over
process. Whereas the Socratic method was developed as a classroom practice that
negated viewing cases as having one correct interpretation, business
communication has currently conceptualized discussion-based classrooms as a
way to show students the right and wrong ways to produce oral or written
communication in the workplace.

This emphasis on correctness places a higher premium on the actual
product produced through case analysis, but “correctness” is a benchmark that is
constantly changing in real-world communicative practices based on the
industry and company a student is working for. Therefore, a focus on product
over process might overlook more valuable skills we can be teaching students.
Specifically, a product-based approach overlooks other rhetorical approaches to
communication that have shown the value of looking at communication as a
dynamic, complex system (Porter, 2013), just as the genre system of case study
pedagogy is itself a complex system. By looking to the field of technical
communication, we find that a more systems-based pedagogy that teaches
students the technical software skills that mediate how they produce
communications might be more beneficial to students’ business communication
needs (Swarts, 2013).
Discussion-based pedagogies in business communication also operate on a tacit presupposition that discussion is best method for producing future results. But, as recent research in medical education has shown, a student’s aptitude during classroom discussion is a poor indicator of future job performance (Williamson & Osborne, 2012). Without ever analyzing the effectiveness of our own discussion-based pedagogies, business communication has no way of knowing whether we are successfully providing a training ground for students’ future career performance. By looking at some recent pedagogical findings in medical education, this chapter suggests alternative ways that business communication pedagogues can begin conceptualizing non-discussion based approaches to the classroom.

To better understand discussion-based pedagogy in business communication in this chapter, I first examine how the Socratic method was developed at HBS and why it was such a successful method for case analysis. Second, I look at how our own field has used the Socratic method and what value it holds for us as educators. And third, I unpack other forms of discussion-based pedagogy in business communication before asking how we might be able to reimagine other pedagogical approaches that help our field innovate the use of cases in the classroom.
The Socratic Method at HBS

The story of developing and using the Socratic method at HBS is important for business communication to understand because it gives us insight as to what this pedagogy was to create in the classroom when used in conjunction with the case method. Specifically, this narrative shows us that the instructor’s role in Socratic classroom discussion is to enact a context for reading and interpreting business problems through the case studies themselves. Ultimately, the goal of this type of discussion-based approach in business school education is meant to reinforce a pragmatic decision-making process that premises action over inaction. This is a much different pedagogical goal than we see in the field of business communication, and it is one that emphasizes process over product.

In a preliminary brochure announcement for HBS, published early in 1908, Dean Gay stated that, “Business, as a department of University training, has still, to a large extent, to invent its appropriate means of instruction and to form its own traditions. From the mass of accumulating business experience, a science must be quarried” (quoted in Copeland, 1958, p. 27). Eventually, this “appropriate means of instruction” would become the HBS case method coupled with a specific pedagogical approach: the Socratic method. However, in order to develop this new approach, Dean Gay looked to the pedagogical work that had
been unfolding at Harvard’s law school (HLS). The first courses taught at HBS
used, “an analogous method,” to the later-developed case method, stated Dean
Gay in the 1908 course catalog, “emphasizing classroom discussion in connection
with lectures and frequent reports on assigned topics – what may be called the
‘problem method’ – will be introduced as far as practicable” (quoted in
Copeland M. T., 1958, p. 27).

The *problem method* that Dean Gay was referring to was a case-based
approach developed 30 years prior at Harvard Law School (HLS) under Dean
Christopher Columbus Langdell. Himself a graduate of HLS, Langdell was
deployed deeply concerned with the effectiveness of the normative lecture, recitation, and
drill model of legal education at the time, known as the *Dwight method*. Named
after a professor at Columbia University, the Dwight method involved students
reading dense treatises on jurisprudence and then undergoing oral examinations
in class to show how well they memorized the information (Garvin, 2003). Only
later, as they apprenticed in a legal firm, would new graduates gain any
experience applying the letter of the law to individual cases. For all of the things
that this method produced, it failed to graduate new lawyers who could
successfully litigate. Seeing that firms were voicing serious concerns with the
level of legal capabilities their new recruits possessed, Langdell implemented the
problem method approach at HLS, which consisted of two main components.
First, instead of lengthy legal treatises, students read actual legal cases published by the courts and referenced them against applicable state and federal statutes to form their opinion on the ruling (Copeland M. T., 1958). By beginning with case rulings and then reverse engineering the logic behind the ruling, students were able to apprehend core legal concepts through an inductive empirical approach. Langdell himself was an undistinguished litigator, but he recognized that lawyers, like scientists, operated with a deep understanding of a few core concepts that they could then apply inductively to specific scenarios (Garvin, 2003). As he saw it, having mastery of these core concepts, and being “able to apply them with consistent facility and certainty to the ever-tangled skein of human affairs, is what constitutes a true lawyer” (Langdell, 1871, p. vi).

And second, to perform this pedagogy in the classroom, Langdell required students to offer their opinions in class through a question-and-answer discussion format that would later be termed the Socratic method. In this interrogatory method (also known as the hub-and-spoke method), the professor acts as the Socrates that we find portrayed in Plato’s dialogues, engaging students in a programmatic line of inquiry, investigating the facts of the case, drawing out underlying principles, and parsing similarities and differences between multiple cases (Garvin, 2003). As David A. Garvin has written, the Socratic method puts the instructor “front and center” using a “controlling hand” so that they are in
control of the discussion (2003, p. 59). Much like Socrates in Plato’s dialogues, the instructor is at the center of the question and answer dialogue, guiding the students down a set of questions. However, unlike Plato’s dialogues, case discussions end by summarizing the merits of all the analyses, and not with the declaration of a correct answer.

This mode of dialogue negated the ability to come to class with solely the facts of the case and the statutes memorized, ready for recitation. Instead, students had to critically engage the case material by writing what would come to be called *case briefs* and be prepared to show a detailed analysis of each case and juridical principle. As the former U.S. Attorney General and president of the University of Chicago, Edward Levi, once noted, this method was so apt because the basis of law is reasoning by example, finding similarity and difference, and distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate analogies (Garvin, 2003). As Levi explained it, the real work of law is in understanding definitional arguments, polysemy, and granular difference; and that is exactly what the Socratic method produced in the classroom when used at HLS.

It is important to understand this history of the Socratic method as it developed alongside the problem method at HLS, because, as a pedagogy, the Socratic method was tailor-made for a legal case-based education aimed at developing a student’s juridical reasoning. So, when HBS began slowly
developing a version of case-based education between 1912 and 1924, they had to assess their unique pedagogical needs as a newly minted academic field, and alter both the case method and the Socratic method accordingly. Whereas the legal profession relied on previous court decisions, HBS constructed their business cases without any statement of decision or outcome, because making the decision itself is exactly what HBS wanted to teach students (Gragg, 1954).

According to Melvin T. Copeland’s (1958) account, HBS quickly realized that the real root of business administration lied in the ability to analyze a problem and make a quick decision that was pragmatic and well-thought out. As HBS began to tailor the Socratic method to their own unique curriculum and educational needs, they attempted to move away from discussion that was entirely directed by the instructor (as in HLS’s version of the Socratic method) and tried to foster more student-to-student interactions. Since the goal of instruction at HLS was to get students to reverse engineer the juridical reasoning that led to a known case verdict, the instructor could use a version of the Socratic method that kept them at the center of the discussion as the hub. However, for HBS instructors, their goal was to teach decision making in a landscape of American industry where generalized theories, prior precedents, and abstract principles had “no weight of authority,” (1931, p. 20) according to HBS dean Wallace Donham. Therefore, to
meet the field-specific demands of a business school case method, a different pedagogical approach to the Socratic method had to be developed at HBS.

As Garvin has told us, HBS classes typically would (and still do) begin with a “cold call” or a “warm call” (2003, p. 61) where a student is pre-selected or selected on the spot to open the class by responding to a question from the instructor. The instructor’s opening question usually requires the student to take a position or make a recommendation, and after the student does so, the instructor throws the question back out to the rest of the students for a class discussion. To foster healthy discussion, the instructor’s questions tend to be very broad and open-ended, and they “link students’ comments by highlighting points of agreement or disagreement” (Garvin, 2003, p. 61). In HBS’s version of the Socratic method, instructors also are more likely to seek out expert opinions in the crowd (students who have experience with a particular field or problem) and to provide a set of “takeaways” at the end of the discussion that summarize key issues and problems (Garvin, 2003, p. 61).

At the time of its development, this approach to the Socratic method was decidedly more “egalitarian” than Langdell’s approach in the law school. To get a clearer picture of what this looks like in classroom practice, we can turn to Louis Barnes, C. Roland Christensen, and Abby Hansen’s book *Teaching and the Case Method* (1994), a highly revered text based upon the authors’ own
experiences using the Socratic method and leading workshops at HBS teaching other educators how to use the Socratic method in their own classrooms. As Louis Barnes et al. have noted, HBS instructors are “planner, host, moderator, devil’s advocate, fellow-student, and judge—a potentially confusing set of roles” (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994b). For Barnes et al., there are four fundamental principles that guide this type of discussion-based pedagogy:

1. A discussion class is a partnership in which students and instructor share the responsibilities and power of teaching, and the privilege of learning together.

2. A discussion group must evolve from a collection of individuals into a learning community with shared values and common goals.

3. By forging a primary (although not exclusive) alliance with students, the discussion leader can help them gain command of the course material.

4. Discussion teaching requires dual competency: the ability to manage content and process. (1994b, p. 24)

Because the objective of the classroom at HBS is to teach problem solving, Barnes et al. have written, a partnership between teachers and students is required for the Socratic method to work—as opposed to a “master-apprentice relationship of great power” where the objective is simply the “transfer of knowledge” (1994b, p. 24). This partnership is the first step in creating a community in the classroom,
which is built around the principles of civility, a willingness to take risks, and an appreciation of diversity (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, Premises and Practices of Discussion Teaching, 1994b). Once a community is in place, the instructor must maintain it by becoming a student ally, which means getting to know students and allowing their personal lives to enter into, and affect, the discussion. Finally, Barnes et al. (1994b) premise this approach on an instructor’s ability to gain a dual competency in mastering both the content of what they are teaching as well as the process of discussion.

So what does all of this actually look like when it is boots-on-the-ground classroom practice? Perhaps in a bit of tongue-in-cheek methodology, Barnes et al. spend the next 330 pages of their text presenting case studies from HBS faculty based on their own experiences, and none of these case studies end with clear-cut right or wrong strategies. Rather, the reader is presented with situations that they should be aware of, and once aware, they can develop their own strategies for classroom management. However, we do get occasional tangible practices that give us an insight on how the open, civil, risk-taking dialogue that Barnes et al. advocate might get foreclosed or shut down. For example, the authors explain how seemingly small practices, like using the blackboard, can disturb the partnership between student and instructor:
How a professor starts the day’s session, for example, sends a message about the working relationship of the whole class. If the instructors lays out a step-by-step outline for the discussion—orally or on the blackboard—the class picks up a clear signal: follow my lead or be lost!...In contrast, when the instructor invites students to set the agenda for the day’s discussion, the openness of the invitation communicates a different message: you, the students, bear the responsibility for this discussion. It belongs to you. As the classroom dialogue evolves, the instructor can further underscore the principle of joint ownership by asking students to summarize points or lines of argument, or to suggest the next question the group should discuss. (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994b, p. 25)

As we can see, maintaining this partnership dynamic is a fragile balance, and at every chance, Barnes et al. make moves to enfranchise the students instead of treating them like apprentices.

To further facilitate a sense of community and partnership in the classroom, HBS actually designed their own physical classroom set up that could best support the Socratic method. Most of us are familiar with semi-circle tiered lecture auditoriums, built for large-enrollment courses, but what most pedagogues may not realize is that this style of classroom layout was specifically
adopted in 1951 at HBS to meet the needs of using discussion in the case method approach (Copeland M. T., 1958). Before settling on an exact classroom design, the school beta tested a classroom design for over a year, gathering feedback from faculty and students about what worked and making adjustments for 12 months (Copeland M. T., 1958). Eventually, HBS settled on a tiered classroom where students could see and hear each other clearly, but where the professor was at the center of the conversation (Copeland M. T., 1958). This physical layout enabled the professor to lead a programmatic line of inquiry while the students could respond more easily to each other since they could see every other student in the class (Garvin, 2003).

To understand why the Socratic method gained such a dominant status at HBS, we can turn to Charles Gragg’s (1954) essay, titled “Because Wisdom Can’t Be Told,” the most infamous and canonical treatise of the HBS case method. According to Gragg, business is a decision-making science based on humans, not in stable knowledge that was unchanging:

Business management is not a technical but a human matter. It turns upon an understanding of how people – producers, bankers, investors, sellers, consumers – will respond to specific business actions, and the behavior of such groups always is changing, rapidly or slowly. (1954, p. 7)
As HBS moved forward with developing a classroom pedagogy, they deemed it less important to teach theory and more important to develop “in students these qualities of understanding, judgment, and communication leading to action” (Gragg, 1954, p. 8). Just as Langdell realized that the Dwight method did not produce lawyers who could exercise good judgment and quick thinking, HBS realized that the “telling method” (lecturing about theory and teaching from first principles) did little to create a dynamic, effective change in the learner. “This [telling method] is the great disillusion of the ages,” Gragg wrote, “If the learning process is to be effective, something dynamic must take place in the learner” (1954, p. 9).

In order to create this dynamic change, HBS believed that the classroom setting had to be a space that did not emphasize right or wrong “answers” to real-world problems. Lecturing from first principles, or the “telling method” for Gragg, is the enactment of our “natural and strong tendency for people to tell other what is what—how to think, or feel, or act,” (1954, p. 9) which translates to a moralism in education that he found repulsive. The alternative, then, was to create a discussion-based classroom setting where “the student, if he wishes, can act as an adult member of a democratic society” (1954, p. 7).

Whereas lecture and recitation represented dicatorial or patriarchial thinking for Gragg, discussion is explicitly democratic communication in action:
A significant aspect of democracy in the classroom is that it provides a new axis for personal relationships. No longer is the situation that of the teacher on the one hand and a body of students on the other...Everyone is on par and everyone is in competition. (1954, pp. 11-12)

For Gragg, democracy represents the equal opportunity for each student to contribute to the analysis. However, and this is an important caveat, the Socratic method is only a democratic practice because cases have no right or wrong answer.

Gragg’s exact words are worth quoting at length here because they are so woven into HBS’s explicit defense of the Socratic method:

   The case plan of instruction may be described as democratic in distinction to the telling method, which is in effect dictatorial or patriarchal. With the case method, all members of the academic group, teacher and students, are in possession of the same basic materials in the light of which analyses are to be made and decisions arrived at. Each, therefore, has an identical opportunity to make a contribution to the body of principles governing business practice and policy. (1954, p. 11)

Here, democratic discussion is the classroom by-product of an approach to case studies that denies anyone, teacher or student, access to the correct answer. The absence of a correct answer denies the instructor (or anyone else in the room) the position of mastery. Just as in actual real-world business scenarios, everyone in
the room must collaborate and pool their knowledge to come up with a viable approach to the problem at hand (Garvin, 2003).

The instructor’s role in this discussion-based classroom is to facilitate a particular interpretive framework among the students that acculturates them to field-specific decision-making practices in business administration. As Arthur Stone Dewing (1954), a fellow HBS professor alongside Charles Gragg, describes it, an instructor’s role is simply to point out connections that students are making and to explain how a certain methodological approach might yield a different insight or result. In a striking declaration, Dewing declared:

In any event, all a teacher can hope to do is to develop, first, an appreciation of the almost infinite complexity of modern business problems, second, the hopelessness of reaching a definite and unequivocal solution, and, third – like the Hegelian trichotomy – the solution of this dilemma by some carefully reasoned but, in the end, common-sense line of action.

What is so striking about this passage is that, like Barnes et al. writing 50 years after him, consensus is not the end goal of a case method education for Dewing. Nor is it the product of the Socratic classroom. Although the instructor might recap some key takeaways at the end of the discussion, or point out some patterns and draw out general principles, the instructor’s role is to reinforce a
pragmatic decision-making process. This process is actually much more difficult than a pedagogical approach based on mastery of the content and one correct solution or interpretation of the data.

As Barnes et al. (1994a) have noted, even highly experienced case pedagogues encounter serious difficulty when working with the Socratic method. Not only is it a difficult pedagogical style to learn, but, when coupled with the case method, it also excludes the use of assigned supplemental texts. In other words, the case materials are the textbook at HBS, and students learn theoretical principles through the classroom discussion itself, not from a textbook that is assigned out-of-class reading. The Socratic method is also difficult because it takes so much effort to sit down with a new teaching case and discover the different ways your students might analyze it. This difficulty can continue well into the fourth and fifth time an educator teaches that same case or infinitely if a case is particularly hard to analyze.

The Socratic Method in Business Communication

For business communication, the lingering legacy of the Socratic method is where the specter of Harvard is most apparent. Whereas the Socratic method often goes unmentioned by name, it is frequently invoked metonymically as the “case method” style of teaching with Gragg, Christiansen, McNair, and other HBS faculty members appearing as frequently cited sources. The advocacy for
the Socratic method in business communication is strikingly similar to Gragg’s and other HBS professors’ discussions of democracy and participation, but the way the Socratic method is enacted in the classroom appears to be much different than HBS’s traditional approach. Specifically, the use of the Socratic method in business communication flips the very goals of emphasizing process on its head and instead gives preference to product and a notion of correctness.

To understand how instructors have conceptualized this specific pedagogical practice in business communication, we can turn to John L. DiGaetani’s 1989 chapter in *Writing in the Business Professions*, titled “Use of the Case Method in Teaching Business Communication.” DiGaetani’s piece is the strongest defense of the Socratic method our field has (although it is contained in one brief book chapter), and it presents many of the common presuppositions that underlie this tacit tradition in the field. Much like HBS, in this learning space of the discussion-based classroom the “teacher is not supposed to dominate the discussion or even direct it,” (1989, p. 190) DiGaetani has written. Instead, the educator’s role is one of shepherding as the students teach each other about the process of analyzing and interpreting business communication issues and finding creative approaches to address them. Using Hegelian language reminiscent of Gragg, DiGaetani says that the case method stimulates a “dialectical class
discussion” (1989, p. 189) where students unpack the thorny political realities of real-world business problems.

As DiGaetani has described this classroom process, the students teach each other, but:

the teacher can of course subtly direct the conversation by the nature of his or her questions and by picking productive and provocative cases…Once it has been picked, the teacher must trust the students to discuss and analyze it, although the teacher must understand what the case presents. (1989, p. 191)

Much as Gragg and Dewing both have stated, the role of the instructor is not to master the content and guide students toward the right answer. Instead, the instructor has to exercise a significant amount of faith and trust that the students will self-select important facets of the case to analyze—although they can nudge students towards those topics if needed. If a student suggests “a naïve solution to the case,” (1989, p. 191) the instructor has to hope that another student will challenge that suggestion, DiGaetani has noted. However, I think it is important to note that DiGaetani never defines who this Hegelian dialectic takes place between—it could be a dialectic between the students or between the instructor and the students. And if it is between the latter, then this undercuts his claim that the role of the instructor is not to be the master.
In order to ensure participation, DiGaetani recommends that the instructor “should make it clear that participation will be a big determinant of the final grade,” (1989, p. 191) up to 50 percent. Simultaneously, he adds, the instructor also needs to create an atmosphere that will encourage everyone to speak. This includes, being a good listener and using “body language and a sensitive approach” (DiGaetani, 1989, p. 191) that indicates all comments are worthwhile and that the success of the class depends on student participation. Additionally, the instructor must be provocative and encouraging, but not judgmental. Through this process, and with carefully crafted speaking and writing assignments to follow up class discussion, students can gain an understanding of “how communication problems in business occur and how they are solved” (DiGaetani, 1989, p. 191).

There are many similarities between DiGaetani’s approach to teaching case method cases in the classroom and Barnes et al.’s explanation of the Socratic method. Both emphasize the role of the instructor as more of a conversation facilitator more than a conversation director, and they both premise a portion of the student’s grade on class participation. Both approaches are also premised on an inductive approach to problem solving and the belief that helping students understand the process of decision making is a more important outcome than the actual case analysis. However, we do not get any in-depth, boots-on-the-ground
classroom strategies from DiGaetani, nor do we get an methodological set of principles to guide classroom practice, like in Barnes et al. There is no discussion of the physical space of the classroom, and there is no hint toward any resources or workshops that can teach instructors the necessary skills for using discussion-based pedagogy with cases. In short, this is a very thin explanation of using the Socratic method in business communication pedagogy.

DiGaetani’s use of the Socratic method also differs from the Harvard legacy in one very significant way. Invoking Flowers’ genre of rhetorical cases, DiGaetani (1989) has noted that business communication can uncouple the Socratic method from the case method and use it with other types of case studies, namely rhetorical cases and simulations. No matter what type of case you use, “the [Socratic] method can enliven business communication courses,” DiGaetani has written, and make “students aware of important issues” (1989, p. 200). But, is this true? DiGaetani has skipped over the key question of whether the Socratic method can be uncoupled from case method cases in order to produce the same participatory, democratic effect in the classroom. And as we move into the next section of this chapter, I want to hold this presupposition in front of us as a guiding presupposition for our inquiry. As with other business communication pedagogues, DiGaetani operates under the tacit assumption that the Socratic method can still operate in the same way when we change the type of case study
used, but this assumption treats all genres of case studies as the same. And doing so, it flips the Socratic method’s emphasis on process over product on its head.

There is a lot to affirm in the Socratic method, since it reinforces the complexity and of human decision making. If there is one key pedagogical takeaway for business communication pedagogues in this historical narrative, it is that a pedagogy rooted in rejecting “correctness” as its end product can be successful. As Garvin (2003) tells us, one of the key outcomes of HBS’s Socratic method is that it moves the classroom product away from correctness, and it forces students to persuasively articulate their analyses and recommendations to their colleagues through the medium of language (whether spoken or written). This is a big pedagogical advantage that discussion-based pedagogy can boast.

Also, the Socratic method fulfills its claim to be a democratic, non-dictatorial pedagogy. However, the way in which this pedagogy performs democracy is not at all the same as the democratic nature that educators like Gragg would like to attribute to it. For Gragg, Dewing, Barnes et al., DiGeatani and many others, the Socratic method produces equality through both the students’ ability to participate in a discussion about a complex problem that doesn’t have one right answer and through the realization that the teacher and the student are on the same par and are in competition. As a former HBS graduate described it, to be successful under the Socratic method approach to case
method cases, the student must “be capable of happy adjustment to a truly
democratic process,” (Dunn III, 1954, p. 93) where democracy means little more
than everyone having access to the same amount of case information prior to
class discussion. But this version of democracy negates the actual physical reality
that people are not inherently equal in the knowledge they possess, their
historical access to information, and their exposure to analytic thought processes.
This form of democracy levels the value of our participation in the classroom and
treats our contributions as the same—when, in reality, I might possess a lot less
information and historical access to education than the person sitting next to me.
Additionally, students do not have a choice to opt out: they are conscripted to join
the discussion because their grade depends on their participation. Equality here
is more reminiscent of meritocracy and the social contract we agree to when we
accept a position with a company: by accepting the job, we agree to produce
work. If we don’t produce, we run the risk of penalty or of losing our job. If we
do produce, we have the opportunity for success.

Further, just as in the functional, political practice of democracy, there is a
distinct social hierarchy at play with the Socratic method. Although Gragg and
others see the instructor’s and the student’s roles as equal and on a flat plane of
access to the knowledge of the case, this is not how the Socratic method plays out
in the classroom. Because this pedagogy is unfolding in an educational
institution, there is always already an implicit hierarchy where the instructor is tasked with evaluating, penalizing, and rewarding the students for their behavior. This hierarchy cannot be erased, which is not to say that this hierarchy itself is problematic. Much the opposite, acknowledging this implicit hierarchy and using it to undermine authoritative interpretations of the case itself is what allows us make this hierarchy perform in a different way. In other words, because the Socratic method is explicitly attached to an approach to case analysis that denies any one correct answer, the hierarchy of the classroom can be altered so that what is evaluated is a student’s ability to analyze, and not to provide a correct answer.

This last point is a radical point, I argue, because it alters what we conceptualize as the product that case pedagogues evaluate and grade. The Socratic method concludes that good decision making and judicious analysis does not have to produce sound decisions or correct actions. Instead, what is more important is the very process of analysis itself as it unfolds through a corporate, collaborative analysis in the classroom. As Albert Dunn III, a former graduate of HBS, has phrased it:

By placing its emphasis on free discussion of the case material in class, instead of on authoritative exposition of the material by the instructor, the case method involves the student in the risk of uncertain progress. At no
time during the learning process can he look into his mirror and tell himself with certainty, ‘I know this and this, but I haven’t yet learned this. I have progressed thus far from yesterday and so far from a month ago.’

(1954, p. 93)

In an era of data-driven pedagogies and institutional systems that are focused on statistically-provable results and teaching outcomes, a pedagogy that unhooks good decision making from correctness—and good teaching from objectively verifiable learning outcomes—is radical in the truest sense of its Latinate meaning: in that it troubles the very root of what many educators believe good pedagogy produces.

This radicalness, however, also comes with two significant blowbacks. First, as Lawrence Kingsley (1982) has noted, if we are teaching students to make decisions, but those decisions are not sound, we are actually widening the divide between the classroom and the real world by setting our students up for failure. As Edward DeBono, the great pioneer of lateral thinking, once quipped, we all have the ability to become very good at training ourselves to think very poorly. This same critique has been voiced since the beginning of HBS’s adoption of the Socratic method, as Copeland (Copeland M. T., 1958) has noted. Early in HBS’s history, business owners and faculty alike claimed that HBS was teaching students how to make quick decisions, but that good judgement wasn’t
inherently taught through this pedagogical approach. And as one early graduate
of HBS noted, the Socratic method impels students towards positive forms of
action instead of negative forms (Niland, 1954). Although there may not be a
justifiable reason to take action or “force a solution,” Niland claimed, students
can feel pressured to “offer up completely unrealistic, farfetched analyses” (1954,
p. 90). There is merit to these claims that we need to take seriously as educators,
especially the emphasis on impelling positive action.

The second blowback is that the inherent radicalness of emphasizing
process can only be effective if the students buy into the game and create a
robust conversation. Without students investing themselves into the process of
analysis and discovery, this “democratic space” turns into a group of apathetic
learners going through the motions that will get them the grade they need to
simply pass the course. As any case pedagogue who has experienced this apathy
first-hand can tell you, it is nearly impossible to salvage a course when the
students have not bought into the process of the Socratic method.

Discussion-Based Pedagogies in Business Communication

As business communication educators began developing different genres
of case studies during the 1980s and 1990s, they also began to alter how they
utilized the Socratic method in the classroom. Whereas the Socratic method was
used to create a context for reading and interpretation, these discussion-based
pedagogies tend to do one of two things: either they substitute an evaluative framework for an interpretive framework, or they create highly structured discussion environments that constrain how and what students talk about in the classroom. As these discussion-based approaches unfold in the classroom, they show an underlying belief in business communication that there is one correct way to read, analyze, and respond to a given case. They also, despite claiming to be anti-authoritative pedagogies that are democratic, tend to accentuate a power dynamic that is already at play in the Socratic method and even intensify it in certain cases.

These approaches are much more managerial and authoritative than the Socratic method which they descended from. One the one hand, for pedagogues who are interested in simulating real-world experience in the classroom, these discussion-based pedagogies simulate the structure of decision making and analysis as it happens in the corporate setting. By intensifying the managerial aspect already inherent in the Socratic method, by extending evaluation outward and focusing on correctness more than process, these approaches help enculturate students to the procedure and evaluation of their communicative problem solving in a corporate setting. On the other hand, these pedagogies teach students that there is one correct way to analyze and respond to a communicative situation, and this is ultimately counterproductive to the goal of
producing students who are well-equipped to read and interpret complex business situations.

Interestingly enough, out of the wide body of case study scholarship that has been produced in our field over the last 50 years, there are only eight articles or book chapters that actually devote time to explaining how they build a case study pedagogy around discussion. While there are plenty of articles that either discuss the benefits of discussion or provide an apology as to why lecture should be taboo in the classroom, not very many business communication scholars have taken steps to develop systems of case analysis in their scholarship. In the eight sources that we do have in this archive, the mechanics of the Socratic method are altered in each approach, but they all share one commonality: they all use discussion as the primary classroom activity when teaching case studies. Because of this, I have categorized these pedagogies as discussion-based pedagogies. Across 40 years of business communication scholarship, the belief that discussion-based teaching is the best way to affect learning outcomes is a tacit presupposition that permeates the field. As Priscilla Rogers and Jone Rymer have noted in the introduction to their special case study issue of Business and

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35 The only types of cases that do not utilize discussion-based classes are shorter problem-based cases, like those found in textbooks such as Thill and Bovée or Field and Weiss; and while there is no reason that these couldn’t be used in a group discussion, these problem-based cases are built to be simple take-home writing prompts.
“can demonstrate that communications have real consequences” (1998, p. 12) in the real world. Discussion-based classrooms are extolled by a wide range of business communication educators for their participatory and “motivating” design (Hildebrand, 1997); their presentation of communication as social action (Rogers & Rymer, 1998); and their nature as a “democratic event” (Forman & Rymer, The Genre System of the Harvard Case Method, 1999) where the instructor and the student are equal partners in the process of analysis. Because these discussion-based pedagogies all share the same academic lineage (the Socratic method), the presupposition that discussion-based classrooms are a participatory, democratic, or anti-authoritarian space of learning is also the most frequent claim echoed across business communication scholarship.

At HBS, the Socratic method is directly tied to the case method genre of case composition. However, as we saw with DiGaetani (1989), business communication educators have unhooked the Socratic method from the case method in order to develop variations of discussion-based pedagogy that better suit their pedagogical needs. While these pedagogies all share discussion as their main organizing principle, they each structure the grounds for how classroom conversation unfolds in very different ways. Each of these approaches provide a more rigorous structure to the classroom than the Socratic method, but this
structure also significantly alters the way that these classrooms function as a “democratic event” (Forman & Rymer, The Genre System of the Harvard Case Method, 1999). This added structure also might reflect a belief in business communication that correctness is more important than process in our case analysis.

Turning first to a pedagogy built for rhetorical case studies, Linda Flower has proposed a three-step process for facilitating group discussion. For Flower (1981), case discussion first begins by her presenting two previous student attempts at producing the case product for that specific teaching case, one of which is superior to the other. Presumably, these sample products would be student submissions from previous semesters; but, if it is the first time teaching that particular case, it can be assumed that instructors would write the samples themselves (Flower, 1981). Using these sample products, students discuss the criteria for why one of them is superior, unpacking the rhetorical strategies and genre conventions of that particular writing form. These criteria, which the instructor should be writing on the board, now become the rubric for which their own documents are to be judged, and this begins a round of peer review:

First, [groups of] three students, working individually, use the twenty-point scale to evaluate the same memo (each student has brought three copies of his or her memo to class). Then, working as a committee, the
three discuss their decisions and negotiate until they arrive at a single score. The individual grades written down before the committee discussion force a serious re-evaluation by all three graders. (Flower, 1981, p. 45)

For Flower, this approach has the benefit of giving the students “direct and explicit evaluation” and it turns the classroom into a “learning laboratory” to test out the skills that are essential for professional writers (1981, p. 45). It is unclear whether this peer review is a gateway to producing another draft of the assignment, but Flower makes no explicit or implicit mention of giving students a second attempt at writing their case product. Based upon my own experience, giving students one chance to complete the assignment before showing them “models” of best practices can produce serious student anxiety.

In Flower’s pedagogical approach, the entire framework of the Socratic question-and-answer interplay is stripped away, and in its place an evaluative framework is inserted. This emphasis on building a crowd sourced rubric for evaluating student work shows a greater concern for the product and less for the analytic process, as we saw with HBS’s Socratic method. As we saw in chapter one, Flower’s (1981) conception of a rhetorical case is one that strips away the real-life complexity of case method cases and attempts to impel students toward choosing a correct communication strategy. This stands in stark contrast to the
case method’s goal of showing students how to develop their own decision-making process—which seems like a more rhetorical approach to problem solving than Flower’s own rhetorical case study. The advantage of Flower’s method, however, is that it moves students away from ham-fistedly copying and pasting the form and rhetorical strategies of a sample document into their own writing, as both Flower (1981) and Eubanks (1994) note. When students are given a sample case response before they attempt to go off and write one themselves, it is tempting for them to treat the sample as a template and reproduce what they see.

As a way of avoiding the anxiety of producing a case product without any direction, Ruth Greenwood (1993) has recommended using group discussion as a way to unpack key issues in the case before students go home to complete the assignment on their own. Greenwood (1993) has offered a three-part approach to discussion that begins with handing out a short case in class, letting the students read through it, and then doing a “vocabulary check” to make sure that everyone understands the terms in the case (1993, p. 46). Conceivably, for longer cases, Greenwood would distribute the case to students at the end of the previous class period.

Next, the students can break into small groups and discuss the key issues of the case and propose communicative strategies for crafting their response as
the instructor circulates between groups and makes sure everyone is “on track” (Greenwood, 1993, p. 46). Finally, each group elects a representative to stand up and present their findings to the rest of the class. Once all of the case’s issues have been “discussed to everyone’s satisfaction,” (Greenwood, 1993, p. 46) students use the notes they have generated in the group discussion to write the assignment in class, either alone or in groups. As Greenwood (1993) has noted, the primary advantage of this discussion method is that students gain problem solving and group work experience while the group representative also gains public speaking experience. Much like Flower, the role of the instructor in Greenwood’s approach seems more managerial than in the Socratic method. Instead of an instructor who is on par with the students and a co-investigator in the case’s analysis, Greenwood’s instructor manages the process and makes sure the whole class is on track in their progress.

Whereas Greenwood’s discussion method is meant for short teaching cases produced in class, Frederic Gale (1993) has offered a discussion method for unified teaching cases that unfold over an entire semester. This approach begins by assigning each student a particular role in the fictional company that is the focus of the semester-long case, and presumably, their participation in the discussion-based analysis is filtered through the subject position they have been assigned (Gale, 1993). However, to break up the monotony of sticking to one
subject position, students are allowed to switch characters several times during the semester.

Unlike other discussion methods in business communication scholarship, Gale includes a lecture component where the instructor can explain the genre conventions of a given document (e.g., memos or letters) before sending students home to attempt the assignment. This hybrid lecture-discussion model allows Gale the freedom to address large-scale genre conventions while also using the discussion portion to unpack key issues of the case as it unfolds each week. And by assigning students a role, they represent different stakeholder interests to ensure that a wide variety of perspective and opinion is included in the case analysis.

In Flower, Greenwood, Gale, and DiGaetani (as we saw earlier), the process of how discussion actually unfolds in the classroom is not defined. For instance, Greenwood never tells us whether she labors to make sure students have sufficiently addressed all of the key issues of the case before she sends them off to write their response. And Gale never gives us a sense of what his fictional stakeholders actually discuss in the classroom.

In contrast to approaches that do not proscribe tactics for actual discussion, both Richard Huseman (1973) and Bruce Gunn and Ivor Mitchell (1982) have outlined highly structured classroom approaches that leave less
room for free-ranging conversation. As his model for structured conversation, Huseman (1973) has used a film-based case study approach developed by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) for teaching more effective officer response during situations of conflict. This program was developed from a federal grant (No. 71-DF-870) in the early 1970s, and it is unclear if this program was continued by the agency after the grant period ended (Huseman, 1973). Huseman has told us, however, that film-based case studies were adopted by other state government agencies and academic disciplines after the success of the LEAA.

Like Gale’s hybrid lecture-and-discussion method, Huseman’s (1973) discussion approach begins with a lecture about the given communication principles that students are expected to learn as the case is presented. Next, students are shown a short segment of the film that presents students with a communicative scenario, introduces them to this method of film-based teaching cases, and then provides them with a shorter open-ended narrative that gives background information on the scenario they are about to watch (Huseman, 1973).

As students watch the film, the instructor stops and starts the video in pre-determined places in order to present several perceptually- and factually-based questions that students answer using a “responder” (or a clicker, as
students use in many large enrollment college courses) (Huseman, 1973, p. 16).

After each student has responded to a question individually, the instructor looks at the results in real-time and each answer is analyzed by the entire group. Since these electronic responses are instantly recorded by the instructor’s computer, she can easily gauge when she needs to pause and spend more time on one segment of the film before going forward.

The largest advantage of this discussion method is that it allows students to discuss aspects of both verbal and non-verbal communication in the teaching case by virtue of the audio-visual format (Huseman, 1973). Whereas any analysis of intentionality and personality is always subjective, film adds a layer of tone, body posture, gesture, and facial expression that makes audience analysis more well-rounded and less flat than it is on paper in a written case. Additionally, this method allows the instructor to pace the discussion and move it toward a pre-determined end.

Like Huseman’s video case, Gunn and Mitchell’s self-actualized case method (SACM) approach creates a highly structured discussion format, allowing for a “controlled simulation” of a workplace situation (1982, p. 68). But where Huseman’s question-based discussion format focuses on creating a shared understanding of a theoretical concept and expectations for behaviors, the SACM
approach focuses on “self-actualization” and “leadership” (Gunn & Mitchell, 1982, p. 67).

Using what they call a “venture team concept,” the students in Gunn and Mitchell’s approach are all representatives of the fictional company used in the case, much like Gale’s (1993) unified case discussion approach. However, here the students are separated into participants and case leaders so that leaders can “police” (Gunn & Mitchell, 1982, p. 69) the discussion and ensure equal opportunity for everyone to participate. Both the participants and the case leaders earn participation points for their contributions, so the need to ensure good, on-topic analysis is critical for the SACM method.

The quality of a case analysis, “can generally be no better than the leadership” (1982, p. 69), Gunn and Mitchell have noted, so the role of the case leader is essential. The instructor gives case leaders leadership assignments that involve three responsibilities: prepping some questions and paths of inquiry for beginning the discussion, performing additional outside research to make sure that they are experts on the case material, and constructing any necessary visual aids to help explain the analysis. Additionally, case leaders are required to meet with the instructor prior to the class discussion in order to discuss all relevant issues of the case and to go over the questions they will present to the participants (Gunn & Mitchell, 1982). Participants, on the other hand, are
expected to have also read some secondary literature to prep for the case, which they will use to add valuable insight during the discussion. If participants’ comments are vapid or said only to gain participation points, then case leaders should verbally redirect participants using the discussion points they have prepared.

As for the instructor, if executed properly, she is reduced to nothing more than a “prop” whose main job is to award points to participants based on their contribution to the discussion (Gunn & Mitchell, 1982, p. 70). If not executed properly, however, the instructor can, “interact with the trainees by making observations, expressing opinions and asking pointed questions when the leaders are stymied or clearly off track” (Gunn & Mitchell, 1982, pp. 69-70).

When we look at all of these pedagogical approaches together as one genre, each of these scholars has a unique way of organizing the classroom structure to enable discussion, but we never get a clear picture of what discussion looks like in their pedagogical approaches. The most proscriptive that case study pedagogy gets is to assert, as Jan Robbins (1975) has, that the instructor should only ever answer a student’s question when it is absolutely necessary (accepting Huseman’s video training approach as the only exception here). Ideally, for Robbins (1975), the goal is to play devil’s advocate and to point out key issues, topics, or strategies that students have overlooked. In agreement with Robbins,
Tedlock (1981) has added that—just as in the Socratic method—it can be beneficial to have a student summarize the facts of the case to get the conversation started, but beyond this, the instructor should only interject to summarize their responses or positions and press them for more.

As David Tedlock (1981) has noted, learning how to manage the nuts and bolts of case discussion is incredibly difficult, and the instructor just has to learn when and how to interject in the conversation. However, it is striking that other scholars provide little more than basic advice for keeping students on track and overseeing their progress, which seems to be the primary role of the instructor: a sort of surveillance manager that makes sure all the shift employees are pulling their weight. It is interesting that the hands-off descriptions of the instructor’s role as co-discussant that we see repeatedly in case study scholarship are consistently contrasted against language that paints the instructor as a manager surveying students and keeping them “on track,” as in Greenwood (1993) and Flower (1981). But this pedagogical contrast ceases to be interesting and becomes troubling when it is combined with a case approach that acts as if there is one correct way to analyze and respond to the case at hand, as in Flower’s approach. And, in fact, each of the discussion-based approaches we have just looked at, if they unfold in the classroom as they do on paper, reflect a belief that there is one correct way to analyze and respond to a given case study.
If this is the case, then the biggest difference between the Socratic method and other discussion-based pedagogies in business communication is whether the process of decision making and analysis is more important than the case product that the student submits. As discussion-based pedagogies become more managerial in their enactment, I argue that they reflect a deeper belief that there is one correct way to analyze and respond to a case. To be clear, if an instructor does believe that there is one correct way to respond to a case, then they would do well to manage how the analysis unfolds during class time. However, any approach to combines the positionality of a laisse-faire co-discussant with the positionality of a managerial overseer in the classroom sets an unfair expectation for students where they are supposed to limp blindly toward a correct answer that their instructor refuses to reveal. This has the potential of turning the classroom into little more than a game of Three Card Monte where the teacher shuffles the cards and the students are left to guess which one is the right card.

Also, when we evaluate these discussion-based approaches against claims that they make instructors and students equal partners in discussion and analysis (Forman & Rymer, The Genre System of the Harvard Case Method, 1999), we find that this isn’t true, just as we saw with the Socratic method. In each of these discussion-based pedagogies, there is a power dynamic at play—and in fact, this dynamic is even intensified. In Gunn and Mitchell’s (1982) SACM approach, the
hierarchy of authority and evaluation extends outward from the instructor to case leaders who evaluate participants. As this managerial power dynamic intensifies outward and each person in the class has the task of evaluating someone else, the classroom begins to mirror “middle management” corporate hierarchy where the middle managers are responsible for communicating the executives’ orders out to the rest of the company (Likert, 1961). Middle management is created as a direct barrier to allowing employees to make decisions that affect the company on a structural level; likewise, intensifying evaluation and management of classroom discussion inserts a direct barrier to allowing students to provide structural input on how their learning experience might change and grow.

Creating New Case Study Pedagogies in Business Communication

As our field moves forward, we need to reassess our classroom pedagogy in three key ways. First, we need understand how our classroom practices affect what our case study pedagogy produces in the larger genre system. We can begin this assessment by asking what we want our classroom practices to produce in relation to the types of cases that we use. Since business communication has developed a more extensive taxonomy of case studies, it is conceivable that we can develop multiple pedagogical approaches that help us achieve the desired goals of each case type. As the narrative of developing the
Socratic method at HBS has shown, that pedagogy was specifically developed to produce business administrators who were trained to make decisions about business problems that do not have one correct answer. If teaching our students how to make decisions about communicative situations that do not have one correct response is one the goals we have in our use of case studies, then the Socratic method might be a good tactic to use in the classroom. However, it is entirely possible that this is only one of many goals and outcomes that we want our case studies to produce. If teaching the process and procedure of decision making in a corporate middle management structure is another goal, then something akin to the Gunn and Mitchell’s (1982) SACM approach might be an interesting way to highlight this structural aspect of decision making. Likewise, Flower’s (1981) approach to teaching rhetorical cases might be a useful way of showing students how evaluative frameworks are built in the corporate setting.

Second, as we begin to ask what we want these pedagogies to produce in the classroom, we need to question our relationship to product versus process. One of the biggest challenges business communications scholars face when using case studies is that, when we take a product-oriented approach to teaching, we end up teaching normative structures for document design. But as students enter the workforce and switch between employers, they will discover that memos, letters, boardroom presentations, and other communications products all differ.
dramatically from company to company. In the end, product-oriented case study pedagogy sets an unfair expectation for how communications products will be produced in the “real world” that cannot be met.

Without hyperbole, every case study published in our field culminates, as its student assignment, in the production of a written generic document (e.g., a memo, letter, email, or report) or an oral delivery (e.g., a presentation or a speech) used to enculturate them into the norms of a particular writing situation. Taking five widely-used textbooks and one journal issue (spanning 1979–2015), I analyzed their case content for the types of assignments they ask students to complete.\(^\text{36}\) The results of analyzing a collection of over 300 sample cases in our field (which included 589 case assignments) show that the letter writing tradition, the \textit{ars dictaminis}, is still a dominant thread in business communication.

Across these assignments, there is only one type of case product that was assigned in each book: letters, which still only account for less than 20\% of total products. Despite Kitty Locker’s (1996) claim that letter writing seems to have died out in our field, the data shows quite the opposite. Additionally, these

\(^{36}\) To get a wide sample of different cases – live cases, case scenarios, hypothetical, and case method cases, the textbooks in this analysis include Field and Weiss’s 1979 \textit{Cases for Composition}; Poe and Fruehling’s 1994 \textit{Business Communication: A Case Method Approach}; ABC’s 1998 Casebook Project; Munger’s 2005 \textit{Document-Based Cases for Technical Communication}; Markel’s 2010 \textit{Technical Communication}; and Thill and Bovée’s 2015 \textit{Excellence is Business Communication}. The 2004 special case issue of \textit{IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication} was not included since these are illustrative cases composed as research cases and do not include student assignments; as such, there was nothing to record.
findings indicate that Elizabeth Tebeaux’s (1985) call for the field to move away from report writing and into more basic workplace written genres was successful. Short report writing, in these six texts, only accounts for 4% of the total case products, as opposed to the 36% of assignments that are letters, emails, or memos.

Table 4.1: Percentage of Documents Assigned in Major Textbooks

![Bar Chart: Percentage of Documents Assigned in Major Textbooks]

However, despite the lengthy list of arguments for case study pedagogy that cite its benefit of creating collaboration and distributed learning, only 8% of all the total assignments were group projects. But the production of generic documents and speeches does not have to be the end use of case study pedagogy in our field. The history of HBS might point us to a different utilization of case
studies: as critical thinking exercises that enculturate our students into the decision-making process of business communications experts.

With all of the complex economic change of transitioning a nation out of agrarianism and into industrialization at the turn of the twentieth century, Arthur Dewing has written that the case method approach was created to not teach “truths,” but rather, “to teach [students] to think in the presence of new situations” (1954, p. 3). However, business communication’s product-based approach that churns out generic business documents or speech forms overlooks other rhetorical approaches to communication that treat communication as a dynamic, complex system. Since the actual production of oral or textual communication in the workplace is much more complex than just the final document or speech act, business communication could benefit from an approach that holds both process and product in balance. In the field of technical communication, both James Porter (2013) and William Hart-Davidson et al. (2008) have been developing approaches to problem solving that refocus attention away from static products and towards processes. Using Porter’s terminology, this means shifting from a “typical static, product-oriented notion of content to a dynamic notion of content development” (2013, p. 138; emphasis original). As an example of what this might look like, both Porter and Hart-Davidson et al. use the scenario of building a website for a client. Under a
content-focused frame, the technical communicator would simply build the website like an order taker, asking questions about the exact content the client wants on the page and then building it to specification. Under a content management-focused frame, the technical communicator would back up and perform more critical exploration (asking basic questions from rhetorical analysis, such as why they need the site, for whom it is being built, and who our audience is) before approaching the website itself as an iterative object and a site of activity between the company and its clients, members, and customers (Porter, 2013). This content management approach allows technical communicators to balance the “design of products, documents, and systems” with the “human interaction in systems—that is, the presence and contribution of the audience or user” (Porter, 2013, p. 139).

On the surface, this content management approach may not appear so different than a content- or product-based approach. However, the real payoff lies in conceptualizing the content (e.g., website, memo, speech) as an iterative, living object that is never final or complete—hence its need to be “managed” by the communicator. As opposed to producing stable objects, this approach to technical communication teaches students that communication content is always living, negotiated, and managed through an interactivity of multiple audiences. And because these objects are non-stable and living, the process of reading and
analysis that precedes that object is just as important as what is produced on the back end. For business communication, conceptualizing case study pedagogy as teaching content management can be a useful way to begin developing pedagogues that can balance an emphasis on both product and process. And by adopting this framework, we might be able to better align our classroom practices with pedagogical insights about how communication actually occurs in industry.

In addition to asking what we want our pedagogy to produce, we also need to ask whether focusing on discussion as our medium of learning is effective. In other fields, this same question has led educators to test discussion-based tactics and see that they can have significant drawbacks. For example, as the idea of using case studies spread from business to medical education in the 1980s, medical schools began to use patient cases combined with a discussion-based classroom tactic similar to HBS, which the medical field refers to as case-based discussion (CBD). CBD was a natural extension out of a pre-existing practice that doctors used to assess workplace behaviors, called “chart stimulated recall” (Jyothirmayi, 2012, p. 649), which uses a patient’s chart to test the trainee on what type of diagnosis and treatment they would recommend for that particular patient. In recent years, the field of medical education has found that CBDs are very effective at assessing a trainee’s decision making ability, assessing
their professionalism in giving extemporaneous responses, and in producing self-directed learning in the individual (Williamson & Osborne, 2012). However, they have also shown that CBDs are highly invalid indicators of future performance, they are inefficient and labor intensive, and they limit the amount of curriculum that can be covered (Williamson & Osborne, 2012). Since they have also shown that CBDs are most effective when they result in oral feedback without grades or penalties, the field of medical education has begun using CBDs as one pedagogical tactic among others for using patient case analysis in their course design (Cooks, 2007). Likewise, as we begin to assess the effectiveness of discussion-based pedagogies in business communication, we may find that they are great at producing knowledge-based competencies but poor at indicating communicative performance or ability.

And finally, in all of our field’s descriptions of discussion-based classroom practices, there is no talk about the physical structure of the classroom that might best enable student success. Although our field focuses significant (and sometimes pedantic) attention to classical rhetorical concerns of delivery as it relates to our students’ presentations and documents (see for instance Dale Cyphert’s 2004 article on PowerPoint), business communication scholarship is yet to have a conversation about how the design of the classroom and the positioning of the instructor affect learning outcomes.
The last significant contribution to building a classroom for case analysis was over 60 years ago when John D Rockefeller funded experimentation on the tiered business school lecture halls that our students are so familiar with today (Copeland M. T., 1958). But a new era of education also demands a new approach to building a classroom ecology that positively affects student learning. For instructors who do not want to be the hub in the middle of a question-and-answer discussion that forces the students into on-the-spot recitation, performing case study pedagogy in either rowed classroom desks or tiered tables might not be the best solution. Movable tables can be ideal for arranging the room into a large rectangle for group discussion, but the growing popularity of tables with power outlets negates this possibility (since they must remain plugged into the floor). Although these might sound like insignificant issue to some pedagogues, instructors who use case studies regularly know that how the ecology of the classroom is arranged is a crucial factor in pedagogical success.
CHAPTER FIVE
SOCIAL ROLES FOR READERS AND WRITERS

In terms of growth, we would not conclude that business communication is thriving…
~ Matthew Sharp and Eva Brumberger

In addition to these genres of texts, composition and distribution processes, and classroom practices that I have unpacked in the genre system of case study pedagogy, there are three more key *topoi* that I believe are important if the field of business communication is to create a 21st-century case study pedagogy. First, business communication is yet to discuss what it means to be a field that teaches its curriculum inside of business schools as opposed to English or communication departments. Locating our field inside of schools of business creates a distinct rhetorical situation that dictates what type of student subject positions we might need to be producing through our pedagogy. I argue that case study pedagogy is a prime way for the field to give itself a consistent sense of branding that makes us look and feel at home in the disciplinary environment of business schools.

Second, we have not had an explicit discussion in our field about both the mediums we ask our students to produce and the mediums we use to deliver
case studies to them. The majority of all business communication case studies result in the production of a stable document or speech act, such as a memo, letter, or speech. However, defaulting to these standard communicative forms might be a relic of a 20th-century pedagogy that is not in tune with current industry communication demands. Also, although our field has discussed multi-modal composition in other aspects of business communication pedagogy, but this research has not fed back into and informed case study pedagogy as of yet. Since both the topic of case composition and case products concerns mediation, I address them together.

And third, we have not explored the relationship between our case study pedagogy and the real world. A common pedagogical benefit we claim for case study pedagogy is that it links our students more directly to real-world experience. However, this desire for and attachment to real-world experience is most often internalized into the case studies themselves by making them appear as if real, as we have seen with hypothetical cases. This insertion of realism in the form of mimicking reality, I argue, is only one way to get students closer to real-world communicative situations. Instead of discussing a case narrative’s fidelity to reality, we can benefit from also building cases around future unknown events where readers and writers explore problem solving and strategic planning for the future of business communication. In this way, they can can develop field-
specific interpretive frameworks for future situations that might also apply to current problems.

Each of these three *topoi* are concerned with the social roles that we assign for students as readers and writers in business communication case study pedagogy. As I argue in this chapter, the field of business communication does not currently have a solid grasp on the role of case study pedagogy in our curriculum. Changing the types of case products, and the mediums through which their case studies are delivered, does not simply alter the types of assignments we give our students. Making an alteration to product and mediation also changes the types of social roles that we assign our students and readers and writers. This alteration has a significant effect on what type of student subjectivities our case study pedagogy produces. In this chapter, I unpack the issues of product, mediation, and our attachment to realism in order to show what a 21st-century case study pedagogy might look like in the field of business communication. In doing so, my goal is not to create a proscriptive framework that business communication instructors should adopt in their classroom, but rather to begin an explicit, public conversation about the potential roles that readers and writers could play in a new approach to case study pedagogy. In each section, I offer a critical rereading of each topic based on current scholarship and case study pedagogy trends across the academy as a way to show how we
might ground our pedagogy on an alternative foundation. Additionally, I hope
that this public conversation can offer ideas for further exploration and
experimentation by instructors.

Rethinking Our Disciplinary Lineage

If we think about the field of business communication in terms of real
estate, it might be fair to say that our field has zero to little curb appeal. To the
other departments in business schools who make up our academic colleagues,
we mostly likely appear to lack consistent branding, and we most likely appear
to put out an inconsistent product. This is a problem for our field, and one that
we can rectify by using case study pedagogy to produce student subjects who are
prepared for their future course work, and industry experience, in a school of
business.

In Matthew Sharp and Eva Brumberger’s (2013) recent audit of business
communication curricula in the top 50 undergraduate business schools, they
came to a sad, yet unsurprising conclusion. “In terms of growth,” the authors
wrote, “we would not conclude that business communication is thriving” (Sharp
& Brumberger, 2013, p. 25). The field has made some moderate strides forward,
they asserted, but largely the song remains the same as it did in the 1960s. Their
analysis is worth quoting at length:
Only two thirds of the top 50 institutions in 2011 actually required business communication. And, requiring business communication typically meant on stand-alone upper division course rather than a sequence of related courses. Course content in that general business communication course, for the most part, appeared remarkably similar to that reported in the survey conducted by Wardrope and Bayless (1999). As they noted, business communication instructors face something of a juggling act in deciding what to include and what to omit from an already overfull syllabus. Our examination of course titles and descriptions supports this survey finding and suggests that the problem is pervasive. However, if we are working to help students develop the knowledge and skills they will need in the 21st-century workplace, we must keep our courses up-to-date. More, our curricula must anticipate, where possible, future needs and try to provide students the foundation and flexibility they will need to meet those needs. What might those needs be? (Sharp & Brumberger, 2013, pp. 25-26)

To be sure, the picture that Sharp and Brumberger have painted is not rosy, nor is it falsely optimistic. Additionally, the authors have written, 76% of all business communication courses are taught in business schools by instructors with a variety of different home academic disciplines (Sharp & Brumberger, 2013).
These findings correlate to Scot Ober’s (1987) findings 26 years earlier that 78% of courses were taught in business administration programs, with an average of 36 different textbooks being used nationally. Sharp and Brumberger’s findings also support N. Lamar Reinsch Jr’s (1996) findings about faculty make up in our field. When, Reinsch Jr (1996) surveyed the professional members of the Association of Business Communication (ABC), she found that with around 1,300 members, 29% received the advanced degrees in education, 26% in English, 15% in communication, and 12% in business administration. This represents an incredibly diverse range of disciplinary identities, and it might explain why there is such a wide variety of textbook usage and theoretical approaches to the course content in our courses.

Because the majority of higher education institutions attempt to cram all of a student’s business communication education into one semester, business communication instructors often feel hard pressed to teach as much as possible in what little time they have. Adding to this current state of affairs, Sharp and Brumberger (2013) found that there is little uniformity to the actual course content at these 50 institutions. Their findings here echo Mary Munter’s analysis of business communication curricula in Writing in the Business Professions 14 years earlier. Published as a joint effort between the ABC and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Munter’s (1989) analysis of business communication
curricula was that there is no guarantee that a student would know what they will be taught when signing up for a business communication course. There was little to no regularity in course content across all of the business communication courses Munter examined.

Based on these scholars’ findings, which are surprisingly consistent over the course of 25 years, I think it is fair to assert that our field currently exists as a scattered, generalist sub-field of professional and technical communication. This should be concerning to business communication scholars because, as the numbers appear on paper, our field has no consistency. Reinsch Jr made this same point when she, somewhat bluntly wrote that, “Business communication is old but immature. It is essential but insecure. It is a practical-science with a potentially bright future” (1996, p. 27). Or, to put it more germane terms, business communication has an inconsistent product and a lack of discernable branding in collegiate business schools.

Unlike the early 1900s, business schools are now complex institutions offering many different degree tracks, and their enrollment has steadily increased since the 1960s (Munter, 1989). As business degrees have become more highly specialized, each sub-field has developed their own systems of rationality, problem solving, and analysis. This translates into our business communication courses when, for example, a marketing student and an insurance and risk
management student bring two different systems of rationality to bear on a case study. The fact that there are now multiple approaches to problem solving and analysis is a curricular condition that we need to be aware of as educators, because it seems reminiscent of an important era long past in our disciplinary history.

If we look backwards at our field’s history, we see a familiar pattern that we are now experiencing for a second time. As Katherine Adams (1993) has written in her history of writing instruction, as American higher education adopted the Germanic style of academic specializations in the late 1800s, courses like English were split between courses for majors and courses for non-majors. Before business communication became its own unique sub-field of communication, students from the fields of journalism, agriculture, business, and engineering were all in the same generalist English courses. However, as the fields began to separate and the curriculum became more specialized, different fields decided to form their own communication courses that reflected the unique communicative and analytic needs of their field (Adams, 1993).

In much the same way, business communication curriculum is at another historical moment where specialization is becoming more granular, and a one-size-fits-all approach to our curriculum is showing its weaknesses. For instance, the rise of communication classes housed in life science departments,
engineering, or information technology reflects the desire for a communications curriculum that can address the problem solving and analytic concerns of each field. It also requires communication scholars whose education is focused on the intersectionality of communication and, say, engineering.

If this is the case, then what is the role of case study pedagogy in this changing academic climate? I assert that developing a 21st-century case study pedagogy is important to this academic climate in two distinct ways. First, business schools already have a long history of using case study pedagogy. If business communication appears to have an inconsistent product and no discernable branding inside of business schools, then building our curriculum on a tried-and-true pedagogical approach gets us one step closer to looking and smelling like we belong in business schools. Not only will it become more important for business communication pedagogues to be able to reason and problem solve under the dominant methodology of statistics that governs business schools, it will also become more important to mirror the pedagogical innovations that are tied to the very legacy of business school education.

Second, as the degree options inside of business schools expand and become more specialized, there is a need for a pedagogy that makes room for disparate analytic and problem solving responses. As we have seen in the history of Harvard Business School (HBS), the Socratic method can be an effective tactic.
for developing a student’s capacity for using an analytic framework and not
asserting that there is one correct answer. In this way, the combination of the
Socratic method and the case method allow for a plurality of analytic
frameworks to exist as equally valid responses to a case study. This also allows
the business communication instructor to focus more on communicative
strategies that students can deploy inside of their analysis and less on the
communicative theories that underlie a given response. In effect, instructors can
talk less about theories of communication and more about what works well and
what does not in a given situation. The beauty of the case study as a form of
communication is that, when used with the belief that there is no one correct
answer, it inherently teaches students about polysemy, complexity, and
uncertainty by its very form. As one graduate of HBS has noted, students must
develop the “art of floundering gracefully” in the uncertainty of case study
pedagogy, but through this process, the student learns the language of business
“not as definitions by rote but as the sense and feeling for shades of varied
meaning” (Dunn III, 1954, p. 94). I would argue that learning these concepts
through doing and action is more important to our student population than
lecturing them on theories of communication, and that is one of the key benefits
of using case study pedagogy.
Based upon where our field currently stands in higher academia, our approach to case study pedagogy is one of the most effective ways to reassert some academic legitimacy for our field.

**Rethinking Mediation in Composition and Case Products**

As I argued in the second chapter of this dissertation, our field has tacitly accepted the presupposition that case products are written documents, most commonly in the form of a letter, a memo, an email, or a report. This bias toward paper-based mediation is also mirrored in the actual case documents that we give our students—which, in business communication, are 100% of the time paper-based. Because the topics of case composition and case products are so closely related, I am discussing them together under the banner of mediation.

This issue of mediation is so important because our students face different technology literacy needs than they did 20 years ago. Returning to Alex Reid’s (2010) scholarship from the beginning of this dissertation, our students are facing new economic realities that change what design and composition look like in industry. Our students live in a world mediated by desktop publishing that is radically different than it was just 10 years ago. Access to design software and technologies far beyond basic Microsoft word processing software means that *design* and *decision making* are mediated through software like iMovie, Microsoft Publisher, Adobe InDesign, and much more. This same claim was argued in the
field of professional communication by Elizabeth Tebeaux in 1985 when she wrote that professional communication was facing a paradigm shift in their relationship to technology and case study pedagogy. Although her assessment is geared towards professional communication, it applies equally to the field of business communication even 31 years later, and it is important to recount here.

In her 1985 appraisal of how educators might redesign professional writing courses for the late 1980s, Elizabeth Tebeaux addressed the then-current use of case studies in professional writing education. Case studies were virtually unheard of in 1985, Tebeaux wrote, and when they were used, they asked students to produce responses by memo, letter, or short report. Tebeaux’s findings mirror the same findings I presented in chapter two regarding the current mediation of case composition and case products in business communication courses. Tebeaux’s solution to rehabilitate case studies for professional writing was to make four specific changes.

First, she recommended that students from different disciplines be asked to work together in group projects so that they could learn about one another’s thought processes, approaches to problems, and field-specific skill sets (Tebeaux, 1985). Second, she suggested that generic documents like letters and memos still be used, but that other genres of writing should be added, like evaluations, progress reports, and proposals. Third, Tebeaux (1985) recommended that we
break away from using case studies to teach the generic form of these documents and instead use them to teach students that qualitative communication principles, like clarity, correctness, and conciseness\textsuperscript{37}, have to be renegotiated in every new rhetorical situation. In other words, we need to teach students that being concise in a layoff memo is not the same metric of conciseness that we want to employ in a long-form Board of Directors report. Each communication principle is governed by a different metric when it is deployed in a specific rhetorical situation. In the layoff memo and long-form report example, conciseness is governed by the metric of empathy and avoiding blame shifting in the first situation while the latter is governed by the necessity of statistical proofs.

Fourth, Tebeaux (1985) recommended that educators use an integrated approach to case product mediation in order to develop a wide range of communication skills across a spectrum of technologies. In a short paragraph that presages Richard Lanham’s assessment of the need for technology in the classroom by eight years, Tebeaux acknowledges that technology will

\textsuperscript{37} I am certainly not advocating that we follow the concepts Tebeaux has laid here, because they tend to veer towards the long history of the “4 Cs” that often are taught as qualitative guides for good writing. For an extended conversation about the 4Cs and their impact on business communication, see John Hagge’s \textit{Invalid source specified}. JAC article that charts this development through Carl Lewis Altmaier, Sherwin Cody and other scholars in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century.
increasingly affect what we teach our students, and it will affect how communication is generated in the workplace:

Clearly, however, communicating by word processors, electronic mail, and dictation that is changed from voice into printed material (bypassing transcription) to be displayed and then transmitted by electronic mail—these technologies leading to the ‘paperless office’ will have a profound effect on how we teach ‘writing.’ In addition, the array of computer graphics now available means that we must teach more than a prescriptive-proscriptive approach to graphics. Our challenge is to teach students how to sense when graphics are appropriate, what kinds of ‘graphics’ are available for what kinds of information, how to integrate them into written material, and how to choose the best graphic, depending on the audience, purpose, and nature of the information. (1985, p. 426)

Tebeaux clearly recognized the ineffectiveness of simply using cases to produce standard business documents like letters and memos, even in 1985. However, what is so interesting is her emphasis on teaching a variety of communication forms along with teaching the technologies that mediate the then-emerging world of the “paperless office.” For business communication scholars, her words are a
call to action asking us to consider what types of media our students are currently using in their post-graduation careers.

In Tebeaux’s assessment, there is a substantive difference in communicating through word processing versus handwriting versus email. And on top of that difference in mediation, we have to be attentive to the visual design aspect of our written communications. Tebeaux’s assessment is equally as applicable to our field’s current approach to case study pedagogy as it was for professional writing back in 1985. To put this in Reid’s (2010) terminology, our current students will be met with a growing demand in industry for communicators who can express attentiveness to the rhetorical qualities of design thinking. These qualities include the use of empathy and multimedia frameworks to create experiences for users, which goes far beyond mere instrumental reasoning. If our goal, as pedagogues, is to prepare our students for this industry demand, we have to teach our students how to use 21st-century communication technologies that will be germane to their careers.

For me, this means asking our students to compose case products using a variety of different mediums, and it also means carving out classroom time to explicitly teach those technologies. As an example of this, I routinely use the first week of my courses to teach the essential software programs that I will be using with that class throughout the semester. For instance, during one semester where
I had an entire class of marketing and public relations students, we spent three class periods in the computer lab learning how to use Microsoft Word and Publisher interfaces. I chose these two technologies based upon their frequency of use in those industries, as well as the fact that many companies will not give all of their employees licenses to Adobe creative suite software. Using Publisher was a creative work around that allowed me to teach layout and design processes that are common across most all design software while also not requiring my students to purchase costly Adobe licenses.

What applies to our students’ case products should also apply to our own methods of composing the actual cases that we give students. In stepping back to look at our current mediation of case studies, it seems that business communication is still stuck in a 20th-century pedagogical approach—if not a 19th-century approach. As a model for rethinking our approach to composing our case studies, we might benefit by looking at case study pedagogy innovations across the sciences in the last ten years.

The sciences have had a long relationship with case studies and forms of interactive lectures dating back to 1947 when then-President James Conant revamped the Harvard science curriculum around case study pedagogy (Shulman, 1992). Due to the large classroom size of most science classes, finding alternative means of student interaction besides lecture is often a necessity to
engage the students in the learning process. As a result, science pedagogues since Conant have developed a system of using video cases (Pai, 2014), social media role-playing cases (Geyer, 2014), simulations (Mosalam, Hube, Takhirov, & Cunay, 2013) and in-class clicker-based cases (Herreid, 2011).

One specific approach to composing cases for our students that represents a more 21st-century approach is the multimedia text, video, and social media approach taken by Aditi Pai, a biology professor at Spelman College. In her “hybrid” approach, as she has called it, Pai combines different media types to deliver an unfolding case about the history of malaria over the course of four weeks. Pai (2014) offers several different recommendations for sourcing video content, from ripping free videos from online sources, to requesting permissions for paid content, or just making your own video cases as the instructor. Although the use of video is not anything new to fields such as business, medical education, and the sciences, it is used in business communication rarely, if at all.

The real innovation for business education is in Pai’s suggestion to use social media in addition to paper- and video-based cases. She does not give us a preview of what using social media might look like, but other educators like Andrea Geyer, a chemistry professor at University of Saint Francis, have explained this type of mediation in more depth. For Geyer (2014), social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Google+, and Pinterest are ideal vehicles for
case composition because 92% of students report regular access to these platforms outside of class. Much like many business communication courses, 95% of the students in Geyer’s classes are non-majors, so the content she builds into the case itself is accessible and thought provoking for a wide variety of students.

Like Pai, Geyer composes unfolding cases that can run across several weeks of class, and multiple cases can be staggered and be concurrently unfolding online. Each case study is composed with three main learning outcomes: to have students synthesize a sound, supported argument, to critically discuss a currently hot (and unresolved) scientific topic, and to understand that science literacy among the general public is an important social good (Geyer, 2014). Using a role-playing strategy, Geyer (2014) provides a handout detailing the procedure and process of the case, and then assigns each student a subject position that they will embody. In another handout detailing their subject position, Geyer (2014) supplies each student with information about their character’s age, their education level, their employment status, and their perception on scientific invention and discovery. Throughout the first part of the case, each student must study their subject position and then write a two-page “character stance essay” that shows how well they understand their character’s persona (Geyer, 2014, p. 365). Once these essays are complete, students log onto
Facebook, in Geyer’s (2014) example, create a profile for their fake persona, and join a private group moderated by the instructor. From here, a series of online discussions unfold in relation to the chosen scientific hot topic, and new discussions are posted for the students to respond to by the instructor. The ensuing discussions are monitored to make sure that it is not “becoming too heated or moving off topic” (Geyer, 2014, p. 365).

For many business communication scholars, there may be some immediately off-putting elements of Geyer’s approach. For instance, asking students to inhabit a fake subject position—and giving them loaded information such as employment status and education level—can easily lead to gross generalization, stereotypes, and potentially discriminatory speech. However, if we accept that this part of Geyer’s pedagogy could easily be altered to create a more ethical communicative scenario, the possibility of using social media opens up an informal communication channel that our students are already using in their daily lives. Using Geyer’s multimedia approach as a springboard for designing our own field-specific case study mediation, we might ask ourselves what types of media our own students are frequently using in industry. Although this question may appear simple, it is deceptively hard to answer, because, as Sharp and Brumberger (2013) have shown, our courses are a diverse mix of students culled from a range of different majors.
To help identify the different types of media I can use in my own case study pedagogy, I use a two-axis grid based on the formality and the location of different media types. Scholars in our field have frequently discussed the issue of formality as a central tension in workplace communication (Hartman & Johnson, 1990), but they have often talked about formality as a quality of the medium itself instead of a way that media can be used. For example, in their article discussing the differences between formal and informal communication channels, J. David Johnson, William Donohue, Charles Atkin and Sally Johnson (1994) defined formal communication channels as those structures where information is flowing to and from official information sources, such as managers and leadership teams. Likewise, informal communication channels, Johnson et al. wrote, are created from the recognition that “a variety of needs, including social ones, underlie communication in organizations” (1994, p. 112). Johnson et al., have also have noted that informal channels are “less rational” than formal channels, and that they function to “maintain cohesiveness in the organization as a whole, and maintain a sense of personal integrity or autonomy” (1994, p. 112).

This view of formalism as a stable quality of the medium, or channel, does not hold when we consider the fact that many of us often use email to communicate very informal information up and down the organizational ladder. Instead of asking how these mediums are inherently formal or informal, we can
use Johnson et al.’s (1994) terms as descriptors of how we engage with various
types of media. What might be seem by Johnson et al., as an informal channel,
such as instant messaging, is not an intrinsically less “rational” medium.
However, we can use instant messaging for informal discourses that can be used
primarily to drive affective social bonds between employees.

To further add to Johnson et al.’s definitions, I add a category of location,
looking at whether these communication channels are used in person or from a
remote location. Adding this dimension helps us explain how the set of exigencies
in that channel mediation might change depending on whether an employee is
present at a board meeting versus teleconferencing. For instance, an employee
would be more likely to use presentation software and oral speech in person at a
board meeting, but in teleconferencing they might be forced to use voice over
internet protocol software (VoIP), screen share software, video conferencing
software (such as WebEx or JoinMe), or a combination of these media types.
Since our current economic climate now offers many different options for
laborers who want to work remotely, or from home, or who might live in another
country, we need to consider this dimension of location when considering the
types of technologies we use to compose our case study pedagogy.

As an example of how this matrix plays out in my own teaching, I
frequently ask my students how their current employer (if they have one)
requires them to communicate at work. Since my courses, taught at a sophomore level in a school of business administration, have a diverse range of majors, students often share personal experiences that are disparate from one another because of their chosen career tracks and the size of the companies they work for. For instance, many students are shocked to learn that large companies have been moving towards a ban on email as a communication medium in recent years since it creates a deluge of data and communication inefficiencies when compared to talking on the telephone, speaking in person, or sending short instant messages on platforms such as Atlassian’s HipChat (Kiisel, 2011). And some students face supreme anxiety when I explain that many meetings in national (or multinational) firms have been moved to virtual platforms in light of rising travel costs and economic instability since the 2008 financial collapse (Lohr, 2008).

Based on my students’ responses and their majors, I tailor the mediation of my cases and the case products, and I vary the amount of formal versus informal communications I ask them to produce. This allows me to respond to the immediate urgencies and needs in each classroom instead of using one form of media in two different classrooms that may not be appropriate for those disparate audiences. For example, during a semester when the majority of my senior students were seeking jobs with large firms, students assumed the role of
entry-level employees at a multinational athletic apparel company. At this firm, their department was in the midst of discussing the effects of a corporate social responsibility (CSR) approach to community engagement versus a shared values (SV) approach. Using a recent article that had garnered significant media coverage at the time, the students had to go off and research these topics and participate in a series of web-based teleconferences set up as weekly “brown bag” sessions. These sessions were informal working lunches where employees discussed how a CSR or SV approach might be beneficial to the team. Then, in a more formal communicative approach, I asked students to summarize their thoughts in an email or memo sent to the department’s leadership team arguing for what they thought was best for the company. The students received both print documents and oral information about the case as it unfolded across several class periods, as well as periodic emails from me that unfolded new developments in the case (such as a recent *New York Times* article that might help us think through other ways that companies have addressed this same issue).

In rethinking our field’s approach to mediation and case study pedagogy, solely relying on certain media, such as paper-based print documents like letters and memos, might be a relic of a 20th- or 19th-century pedagogy that does not meet the communication needs of modern industry. I have provided one small example of how we can rethink our case composition and case products based on
21st-century new media, but there are many other ways to conceptualize mediation, especially in relation to case genre. For instance, live cases, as we saw in chapter two, are a great way to make outside connections with industry executives, and blending this genre with teleconferencing, video recordings, or social media opens up a completely new set of possibilities that the costs and time constraints of in-person appearances foreclose.

**Rethinking Our Approach to Realism**

One of the most primary (and contested) topics in the history of using and theorizing case studies in our field has been their fidelity to *realism*. This relationship to realism is not unique to our field, to be sure, and it cuts to the very core of what we see as the role for students as readers and writers of case products. When fantastical, hypothetical, and case scenarios are critiqued for their inability to reproduce the real-life context of the workplace, these scholars are also implicitly imagining the student’s role as a legitimate employee in a given company that is capable of producing certain types of rhetorical effects. I argue that by locating realism in the potentiality of a future event instead of in the narrative structure or rhetorical situation of the case itself, we can open up a new social role for our students that is premised on invention and decision making instead of producing one correct interpretation or action in the case.
As we saw in the history of HBS, armchair cases, or hypothetical cases have been widely eschewed for their apparent skein of falsity that shows through to students as well as their non-inductive nature (Culliton, 1954). However, as we saw earlier, this matrix between fantasy and reality in case studies does not hold at the bounds; it begins to fray and unravel quickly. In business communication, one of the most articulate critiques of the view that cases reflect reality was voiced by Lawrence Kingsley (1982) in his discussion of case studies as a form of communication. For Kingsley (1982), HBS’s genre of case method cases are not just a learning tool, but rather a form of communication that is poorly written and under-theorized in its design. Business schools, he claimed, have thought poorly about the case method case, and business communication, as a field, has largely accepted their presuppositions instead of running them through our own theories about language and asking what they are and what they produce.

One of Kingsley’s (1982) main concerns with the case method is that the easy binary between armchair cases and real cases upholds a naïve belief in realism rooted in 19th-century naturalism. This version of naturalism tried to present life as it really was, Kingsley claimed, and in keeping with this tradition: case theorists speak of ‘tranche de vie,’ ‘slice-of-life,’ ‘realistic detail,’ ‘actual business situation,’ ‘real business facts,’ and so on. The case, it is believed,
must deal with an unembellished business episode so as not to be an
‘armchair case,’ which might not be true-to-life. (1982, p. 41)

To achieve this sense of realism, case method writers effectively run out a
formalist doctrine that posits the case as a self-contained document that can be
interpreted without recourse to the author, environment, or the student
themselves. It is no coincidence, according to Kingsley (1982), that the case
method evolves concurrently with the formalist movement in literary criticism,
Ransom’s *New Criticism*, and T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

Instead of a naïve realism, Kingsley has claimed that the case writer
selects which details the audience (students) will read, which limits the
“complete picture” of the situation that students can access (1982, p. 44). Because
so much of the actual context is “hidden” from students, they can give a plurality
of interpretations that eschew any one correct answer to the case itself (which he
sees as problematic). And since certain interpretations of that context must be
more plausible than others, “we are always in danger of misreading the evidence
of the case” (Kingsley, 1982, p. 46). Kingsley’s argument here is curious, and
perhaps a bit paradoxical. He critiques a position of naïve realism while
simultaneously positing a “real” context that is hidden from view by the very
nature of representation (here, the use of a written narrative that repackages an
event to an audience but can never fulfill its obligation to the real). For Kingsley,
then, the problem with realism in the case method is that both “realistic” cases and armchair cases can never give us access to the real situation that occurred in a past historical moment.

Kingsley’s position remains the most cogent argument against the easy binary of fantasy and realism in case studies. However, in order to bring our understanding of case study pedagogy into the 21st-century, we need to understand the shortcomings of Kingsley’s argument in light of more current research on communication’s attachment to representation and realism. To do this, we can position Kingsley’s argument against earlier arguments about the nature of the rhetorical situation and more recent research about communication’s relationship to futurity.

The discussion about the rhetorical situation began with Lloyd Bitzer’s *Philosophy and Rhetoric* article published in 1970. In short, Bitzer (1970) claimed that a problem, situation, or event exists prior to our interpretation of that event, or situation. In an infamous exchange known well by scholars in English and communication departments, Richard Vatz (1973) argued against Bitzer’s realism by claiming that the rhetorical situation is highly subjective: the rhetor defines a situation to their audience that does not necessarily preexist. Since the chain of events that comprises a situation can endlessly regress backwards, the human subject is the one that must define the boundaries of that event and give it
meaning, according to Vatz. To round out the exchange, Scott Consigny (1974) argued that both Vatz and Bitzer provide us with partial views of the rhetorical situation, claiming that neither the situation nor the rhetor is the primary arbiter of the rhetorical situation and the determinant of meaning. Rather, according to Consigny, both the event and the rhetor act together to define the meaning of the situation and to create its exigence and relevance for the audience. The rhetor is constrained, in other words, by the interplay of events, topics, and materials that they can use to invent a discursive response (Consigny, 1974). When we examine Kingsley’s position through the lens of the Bitzer-Vatz-Consigny dialogues, Kingsley seems to occupy the same response as Bitzer: there is a reality that pre-exists the rhetor, or case study author, that our subjective representation of through written narrative hides from our students’ view. In this sense, his position paradoxically eschews a naïve realism while also asserting that there is an objective reality that the case method’s narrative form does not give us access to.

The question for case pedagogues is how might we be able to alter Kingsley’s position and avoid replicating the paradox of claiming that there is a narrative form that could ever give us access to an objective reality that underlies a case? One possible answer might be to look towards fantasy and its relationship to futurity instead of looking at whether a case narrative could ever express
fidelity to reality. Kingsley himself gestures towards this answer in the very same article we have been discussing. While arguing the pedagogical utility of case studies, Kingsley cites Malcolm McNair who infamously claimed that we should not use case studies as guides for future decisions. The past is an unreliable guide to the future, McNair wrote, because “the question that has not yet been asked cannot be answered” (cited in Kingsley, 1982, p. 40). Although the HBS case method was built to teach decision making and good judgement to future business administrators, McNair never claimed that studying past historical examples would give students a guide for future action. Instead, the real value of the case method lies in its ability to enculturate students into a particular ethics of decision making in their given field, and to give them experience in making and articulating that decision to a larger group. Therefore, one possible way to address the concerns of realism and case study pedagogy might be to ask how we can prepare our students for an unknown future? How can case study pedagogy be a tool for inventing the future in addition to a reflective tool that teaches us about past action?

The fields of risk management, disease control, and national defense have been using case studies to invent possible responses to an unknown future. As one example of this, Japan’s series of devastating national disasters has become a popular topic for risk management. Statisticians and philosophers, like Nassim
Nicholas Taleb (2007), have become increasingly interested in black swan events
(highly improbable and unpredictable events) that have a driving impact on
human life, such as the incalculable likelihood of an earthquake, tsunami, nuclear
meltdown, and multiple health pandemics occurring back-to-back in Japan.

As a way of planning for the impact of these unlikely events—and as a
way of planning viable response systems—the professional field of risk
management (not the academic field of risk management) has been constructing
case studies based upon hypothetical scenarios and posing them to industry
professionals. Risk and Management has been working with industry leaders to
create hypothetical scenarios that they then pass on to a specific industry
executive who responds in a detailed plan, providing reasoning for each decision
that they make. These hypothetical cases are collected into an online bank where
anyone can access them and see how other people from around the world
responded through crowdsourcing platforms (Risk & Insurance, 2015).

As Bloomberg’s Bureau of National Affairs has reported, risk managers
are not using these hypothetical scenarios, or “stress tests scenarios,” to predict
the future, but rather to help companies, such as insurance companies, avoid
systemic, global collapse (Qassim, 2014, p. n.p.). By posing worst-case scenarios
and anticipating events that seem statistically unlikely, insurance companies can

38 As of the date of this publication, these case studies have been removed from Risk and
Management’s website access.
discover gaps or insufficiently defined clauses in their traditional policies while also developing a strategic response plan. For instance, when the Centre for Risk Studies stress tested insurance risks related to cybersecurity attacks, the resulting algorithmic errors caused “major write-down, trading losses, lawsuits and physical damage to the fictional company, triggering a generalized distrust of computerized systems and widespread losses across the corporate world” (Qassim, 2014, p. n.p.).

For business communication pedagogues, this approach to future planning might be a useful way to rethink our relationship to case study pedagogy and realism. It is easy to critique fantastical cases, case scenarios, and hypothetical cases for their inability to reproduce the dynamic context of the workplace (Kohn, 2015). However, when our criterion for judging a case study is no longer its fidelity to realism but rather its ability to produce decision making and strategic planning that could have real-world effects, we can find new uses for these cases that involve inventing an unknown future. Unlike planning for a total systemic failure of the insurance industry, we could create assignments for our students that replicate crisis management scenarios. For instance, using the historical case method case presented in the Casebook Project’s Denny’s discrimination case (Chin, et al., Denny’s: Communicating Amidst a Discrimination Case, 1998), we could reimagine a scenario where hackers have
broken into Denny’s social media accounts and posted racially discriminatory comments and pictures, setting off a media firestorm. And to add to the scenario, we could add a series of other unlikely discriminatory events, such as a racially motivated assault and a discriminatory verbal offense all occurring at Denny’s restaurants in the same week. Students could be asked to develop a strategic communication plan for Denny’s in responding to these social media posts. This work would necessitate research to find companies who have dealt with other similar events, and then a well-reasoned communication strategy to deal with the weight of so many discriminatory events all occurring in the same week. More than replicating a potential reality for these students that they will likely have to navigate in the near future, these types of cases can help them inhabit future roles as readers and writers so they can build a skill set for navigating crisis, communicating tactfully as a corporate agent, and learning how to develop a communication strategy.

Concluding Thoughts

Harvard Business School officially named and instituted their revolutionary pedagogical approach to business education in a faculty meeting in 1921 (Copeland M. T., 1958). It has been 95 years since the case method and the Socratic method were designated as the official pedagogy of HBS, and in those 95 years, case-based education has spread out across the academy, most notably in
the fields of medical education and the physical and life sciences. However, when we situate the field of business communication against the rest of the academy and ask how far our field has plumbed the theoretical and practical applications of case study pedagogy, we are faced with the raw truth that our case study pedagogy remains under-theorized and underdeveloped. There are things that our field has done well to produce in case study pedagogy, such as developing different genres of case studies that we can use in the classroom (despite never developing a taxonomy for these cases). And we have also done well to develop alternative discussion-based pedagogies that alter how the Socratic method operates and what it produces. However, our field has left other key areas either untouched or underdeveloped.

In one the earliest statements about case study pedagogy at HBS, Arthur Stone Dewing once quipped that there are two, and only two, pedagogical approaches. One the one hand, there are pedagogies that survey the important facts about humans throughout time. On the other hand, there is “training to enable the individual to meet in action the problems arising out of new situations of an ever-changing environment” (Dewing, 1954, p. 2). For Dewing (1954) and many other scholars across the academy, case study pedagogy is an action-oriented training meant to discover solutions to problems that are arising, not problems that have already arisen.
Throughout this dissertation, I have produced a version of how HBS developed the case method and Socratic method as the dominant form of business school education internationally. In doing so, my aim was to show what a powerful and innovative tool case study pedagogy has been during the 20th century. HBS’s approach to case study pedagogy has uniquely changed the face of business school education throughout the world, and this influence has altered the rest of the academy and industry. Business communication has benefited from this legacy as well, but our current historical moment demands that we place our version of case study pedagogy back on the table and ask how we can alter it to make it a lasting pedagogy into the 21st century. To maintain our relevancy as a field, I have argued that business communication scholars need to rehabilitate our conception of case study pedagogy and bring our practices into the 21st century. By doing so, we might be able to better meet both the economic exigencies that await our students in the coming years and the academic and professional exigencies that await our field.

Breathing new life into case study pedagogy, however, will require a significant amount of labor for our field. In addition to rethinking the mediums we use to compose case studies and the types of case products we want our students to create, we also have the opportunity to create cases that do not simply replicate the attachment to realism that has remained at the core of the
case method for the last century. We also need to rethink our approach to building an internationally accessible case clearinghouse that educators can use—and will be motivated to use. Without easily accessible resources, business communication educators are forced to compose their own cases, which is inefficient and impractical, especially for faculty and staff who have a heavy teaching load or who have additional jobs besides their teaching job.

As we rethink these key areas of case study pedagogy for our field, it is imperative that we think through each area as a genre of action inside of a larger genre system. Thinking about case study pedagogy as a genre system disallows us the ability to believe that we can alter one aspect of our pedagogical approach without other aspects of our pedagogy being necessarily affected. As we alter the text of the case study itself, through its mediation, its attachment to realism, or the case products it asks students to produce, we create tensions that require us to rethink our classroom practice, our composition and distribution processes, and the social roles that we assign to our students.
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APPENDIX A: ABBUHL’S 1945 CASES

PROBLEM NO. 15

Purpose:
1. To give training in tact.
2. To give training in approaching prominent people.
3. To give training in persuasion.

Assumptions:
1. As secretary of a local society of engineers, you have been asked to invite a prominent engineer to address your group.
2. You do not have funds available for paying a speaker.
3. You do, however, have funds enough to pay travelling expenses.

The Problem:
1. Write the letter inviting the prominent engineer to address your group.
2. Make the engineer understand that his travelling expenses will be paid, but that he will receive no fee for speaking.
3. Make him feel that addressing your group is worth the time and effort he will spend.
4. Be courteous, cordial, and tactful in your letter.

PROBLEM NO. 21

Purpose:
1. To give practice in interesting laymen in a technical fact.
2. To give practice in stimulating the reader’s emotions.

Assumptions:
1. That during the year more pedestrians are killed by automobiles in the month of December than in any other month.
2. That most of the deaths occur between the hours of six and eight in the evening.
3. That the article will be published early in December.

The Problem:
Write a 250 word article that will by arousing emotion make the reader careful during the month of December.

Procedure:
1. Devote the first 125 words to dramatization; that is, a single scene such as might appear in a short story.
2. Devote the next 75 words to a statement of the facts given in the assumption.
3. Devote the next 25 words to a direct exhortation to the reader.
4. Devote the last 25 words to a reference to the dramatization and a final warning.
5. Number the four sections.
6. Pick a title which will attract the reader’s attention.
7. Count the words and put the total in parentheses at the end of the article.
APPENDIX B: COPELAND CASE

The following is an “embryo case” created by Melvin Copeland for his Commercial Organization course at HBS in 1912:

4. The records of a certain department store, kept through several years, show that of ladies’ gloves, sold at the follow prices, only the lines selling at prices here indicated in italics have had any appreciable sale in the store: –

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0.75</th>
<th>1.50</th>
<th>2.75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) How would the store rearrange its stock plans as a result of these figures if it were the only store of its kind in the market?

(b) How would these changes affect the buying methods of the store?
(c) Would your answers be the same if there were sharp competition in the market from other stores of equal strength and size? (italics original; quoted in Copeland M. T., 1954, pp. 28-29)