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# USING MICRO CASE STUDIES TO CREATE LIVELY, INTERACTIVE BUSINESS CLASS DISCUSSIONS

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# USING MICRO CASE STUDIES TO CREATE LIVELY, INTERACTIVE BUSINESS CLASS DISCUSSIONS

Edgar Burns

## INTRODUCTION

Micro case studies (MCS) flexibly reduce instructors' efforts in preparing and delivering classroom learning at each level of business education from certificate or diploma level to graduate school. I have used versions of MCS in classes at each of these levels. They offer holistic and culturally adaptable teaching moments that engage students. These small business case studies can be stretched or compacted to fit available class contact time. They help translate ideas into actual business practice, and they link students' theoretical learning to real-world contexts by introducing relevant human-interest examples for student-teacher discussion (Shapira et al., 2026). In the second half of this article practical guidance is provided for these active learning exercises. Suggestions are given for how to create class interaction through a process of to-and-fro questioning by the instructor, student responses to questions, explaining points in the text, and commentary on views expressed, while encouraging and responding to students' reactions. Busy instructors can deliver these MCS discussions at different levels of conceptual 'unpacking' in different learning environments for their intended teaching purposes.

A micro case study can be defined as a brief written story that illustrates one or more business concepts told in narrative form in news, magazine, or social media reporting. These short accounts in a popular register are used to help students assimilate the larger implications of, and business concepts associated with, successful or failed management practices. Instructors will vary the elements of MCS used in the presentation of this pedagogy. Short written texts of less than one hundred up to several hundred words in length or one-page articles or news reports are all satisfactory story formats. Having a photograph may add interest for students. As flexible classroom resources MCS can be used occasionally or regularly depending on instructor purpose and topic relevance. Micro case studies can be introduced at different points in classes to suit teaching plans, depending on the mix of components in the teaching.

The use of case studies is well-known within business education. Their common teaching aim across different fields such as marketing, entrepreneurship, finance, and management, is to link students' understanding of business concepts to real-world situations, encouraging them to organise and analyse evidence for making decisions and developing strategy (Andersen & Schiano, 2014). Over the decades case studies have been in use, some have become complex and detailed, requiring sustained group or individual study and calculations for assignments or examinations (Rendtorff, 2015). Methodological analyses of business case studies include statements such as "case studies must be designed and produced with scientific rigour" (Dul & Hak, 2008, p. xv; Levant et al., 2016).

Micro case studies differ from the more formal and elaborated scenarios that many case studies genres have become. Like simulations, they are half-way towards addressing McCarthy and McCarthy's (2010) challenge that "case studies are not enough" and more experiential learning is needed. This is still true for MCS, which are not fieldwork nor work placement, but avoid the set-piece formality of complex case studies that can overshadow the immediacy of decision-making and responding. They aim to capture the interactive frisson of students in the classroom having to think on their feet as in actual work environments. They are responding in the moment to questions and answers, and countering arguments to sort out what they think and how they would react to a situation that is incompletely described. Micro case studies provide a defined introduction to an actual rather than hypothetical situation but are shorter and more flexible than the more formal scenarios, and hence easier to integrate into the flow of teaching.

The present instructional technique of MCS does not simply vary classroom tempo but includes interesting though less tangible elements of business teaching. These elements are not usually front-of-mind for many students but offer broadening perspectives for learning and integrating business concepts with practice. For example, a related focus is Slocum et al.'s (2024) somewhat apologetic description of their "'micro-insertion' approach, as a practical and effective method to teach ethics at business schools" (p. 45).

Using MCS initially emerged from teaching evening classes for an Introduction to Small Business course for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The course typically attracted individuals who had established, or managed, local businesses. Weekly teaching used a general textbook on SMEs, covering topics such as production, human resources, marketing, financial planning, budgets, and retail. Teaching a three-hour evening session catering for people coming from their day's work, often without having eaten an evening meal, made engaging students a challenge. Micro case studies solved this problem. Recounting tales from my own business journey, enriched by using micro case studies, gained students' interest (Moeran, 2021). This has for me now become a core teaching practice that combines what are often seen as contrasting principles—learning that is student-centred while teacher-directed (Lancaster, 2017; Murphy et al., 2021; Yoshida et al., 2023).

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: DIALOGIC LEARNING

Using short case studies is not out-of-the-box pedagogy; similar approaches exist in the academic literature, such as *The CASE Journal*. However, the media provenance, references to local organisations, and non-systematised evidence in the MCS offer accessibility, immediacy, and authenticity. The present discussion of deploying MCS is based on the pedagogical principle of dialogic learning: engaging students such that learning is in a key sense created in the classroom exchange itself, not passively received. Micro case studies lower the formal amount of input required, using interaction with other students and the instructor questioning the content and reasons in the MCS exercises (Barak, 2024; Teo, 2019). Such active teaching and learning boosts student understanding as well as engagement (Ewarawon & Sylvester, 2025).

Micro case studies offer one route towards this pedagogical goal as part of the teacherly science and art of working out what assists students to learn in their classroom environment (Bain, 2004; McDonald et al., 2022). In addition to teacher passion and skill, active learning is typically the outcome of adapting teaching exercises, creating new flexible teaching activities, or describing business practices, each of which can be re-used in different settings (Dal Mas et al., 2021).

Repeatedly 'translating' business principles for different learner cohorts makes active learning pedagogy a foreground consideration (Bell & Bell, 2018). I have found micro case studies to fuel students' active learning across four learning settings: technical college SME business evening classes; seminar-style teaching to front-line managers at Heinz Wattie's food-processing plant; teaching service organisation youth leaders, and lecturing first-year business degree students. The MCS as active learning enables 'hands-on' understanding for non-traditional learners while also positively engaging students familiar with academic routines (Carreira & Lopes, 2021; Hsu & Hamilton, 2008).

Each learning environment requires illustrating and putting into context the core concepts of the particular class and semester course (Hakala et al., 2020). This in turn involves using examples, different modes of instruction, and interactional styles in each situation to translate and bring to life core ideas about business management, marketing, finance, and so on. Learning gains value if students can see how such ideas are applied or misapplied in a workplace or organisation. Another way of describing this dialogic pedagogy is relational learning (Stewart et al., 2025). Micro case studies, along with lectures, seminars, and group exercises, contribute to flexible classrooms that enable interpersonal connections (Gashoot & Mohamed, 2022). This is a shift away from relying on lecture-hall or static classroom learning environments in business and related disciplines such as law (De Diana & de Vries, 1990).

## USING MICRO CASE STUDIES

I use portable micro case studies to generate active participation and learning. Before a session, I select from my scanned collection and print the one-page article I have chosen for that session. This can be done quickly, between administrative and other duties. I prepare a copy for each student from my folder of class materials, to be taken to class along with the textbook, sticky notes, slides, and other materials I have chosen to use.

When I use the case studies in class is flexible. I can easily decide as the class proceeds at what stage to introduce a micro case study exercise, considering such factors as: What best fits the energy of the class today? Should we spend fifteen minutes or longer? Pragmatically, what else do we need to fit into today's class and how will the case study discussion pace and retain attention and learning? When I do introduce a MCS, as discussion of the case study progresses, I keep a mental track of whether it is continuing to be productive for students relative to the learning I as instructor am trying to achieve. I have used this approach online, with students accessing the loaded MCS from the teaching platform, and it can work well. The issue can arise of some students making their laptop screens blank and not fully participating in the virtual classroom, which requires resolving for MCS to work well.

### Teaching objectives

By presenting and leading with a micro case study, an instructor will have achieved, quickly and with little effort, substantial student participation and interaction with case study material. They will have both elicited and enlarged students' business knowledge, in many cases to their surprise. Micro case studies help re-engage tired or inattentive class members, lifting the class atmosphere from passive reception to lively discussion in which the instructor actively listens to and interacts with students and they in turn respond to their fellow students' questions and answers. As class members collectively examine and comment on the narrative of a current business example, this introduces a sense of immediacy. Often students bring family or local snippets of knowledge to the conversation that enrich the discussion and affirm their participation.

## Learning objectives

Participating in the brief case study enables students to identify key parts of the business depicted and how these are related. Students' comments expand their understanding of the case study business's strengths and weaknesses. They can also recognise incomplete or missing business information in the micro case study and consider how this matters for assessing this example business and other businesses' viability. Discussing case studies with other students who may have different national, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, or ambitions, enables students to hear from those who might see different opportunities and have different views on how well this business is doing and its further growth.

Regularly using micro case study analyses in the classroom strengthens instructors to succeed both in the ease of delivery and through achieving benefits from student interaction (Howell, 2021). For students, it embeds the logic of applying business principles to each new case study: how would the marketing plan from last week work in this week's scenario? It brings learning from beyond the classroom into the classroom (Maczynska & Feilla, 2020). I have found that repeated MCS use fosters recognition and interest: when students hear a MCS announced they know this will be a detour interesting in itself, and that it will also illuminate the larger classroom topic.

## Instructions for running the exercise

### *Overview*

Instructors can develop a habit of collecting short accounts—in effect, examples or tiny case studies—found in newspapers, online and social media, or local (community or regional) 'news rags.' Other sources include airline or tourism magazines with short business success stories. Introducing these in the middle of a class shifts the mode of student engagement, activating student opinions and motivation. Every student can at least ask a question or issue a challenge. Instructors can use MCS as one or more segments to structure class time-flow, varying this from week to week to fit in other elements such as class guests or exam preparation.

### *Flow of the case study exercise*

1. *Flexible MCS:* The instructor brings to class, ready to hand out, one case study from their collection. It has been scanned from the source and printed on a single sheet of paper (online options work in some situations, but not all). As an academic self-discipline, when collecting a suitable article to use as a future MCS, I write on it the source, date, and page number, and the URL if online. Students have these reference elements visible for their use. These are published materials, so copyright is not an issue, and no private documents are used. Instructors may note on their own copy points they wish to raise in discussion; this frees them from further preparation. However, with a prepared mind, the aim is to go with the flow of discussion.

2. *Classroom step change:* During class, the instructor announces the class activity shift: "Here is a new one-page case study for us to look at. It's pretty short. Pass them around so everyone has a copy. It's yours to take home. Write on it and underline/circle/highlight things you want to note, ask about, give us your opinion about, or challenge. I'll give you a few minutes to read through. Quiet conferring with a friend is okay but no disturbing others still reading."

3. *Reading and discussion time:* The exercise is based on reading here-and-now by a mix of stronger and hesitant readers. After 5 to 10 minutes the instructor brings the class to order. A series of

instructor questions, and explaining unfamiliar terms, requires little preparation but allows the instructor to draw out students' responses and reactions to the text. The instructor manages the length of case study discussion to fit class timetables and break times. Depending on the MCS and time available, a 15- to 40-minute plenary session is readily achieved.

4. *Involve everyone:* A useful open-ended start is to go round all students in the class by inviting each in turn, "Tell me something you've noted in the article. It can be a question, just something you don't understand, or that you find interesting or weird." This brings in diffident or quiet students as well, especially class members from another culture or linguistic group. Another useful prompt is, "Is there a word that you or others in class might like to see if I can explain?" Students like putting heat on the instructor!

5. *Basic description of text:* I often also start by drawing out basic description from students—what does the text of the case study actually say? Setting aside what they think about the business, what is being asserted? What is that paragraph or sentence telling us? This commits students to at least minimal participation. It generates interaction but disciplines the conversation by focusing on evidence and claims the text makes. More capable or confident students can be asked advanced questions about how business principles apply.

6. *Basic explanations:* The instructor can then ask (or respond to) questions about terms and jargon or how the story illustrates a business concept, encouraging shyer students and asking the class what they think about the article statements. Open-ended questions can be useful—such as, "What else do we need to know?" or "What aren't we being told here?"

7. *Discussion strategies:* One strategy to generate conversation is to widen a student exchange (for example, a comment, opinion, or reaction), by bringing in other students and asking what they think. Another dialogic technique is to make connections for students (or invite them to make connections) between the MCS and textbook or lecture concepts and ideas already presented in the course. Instructors keen to develop their own skills in generating and guiding active class discussions can reflect on in-class work or class preparation, asking themselves: How does drawing out assumptions implied in student questions or asking them what is *not said* in the case studies sharpen students' critical thinking about the MCS content? This may involve probing for reasons behind students' thinking to open further aspects for discussion which are not explicit in the case studies.

8. *Possible discussion questions:*

| | Action or issue | Possible starter questions |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Including all students by going around the class asking each in turn, or every second or third one. | "Tell me something you're seeing in this case study? What makes that interesting to you?"<br>If a student says, "Same answer as him," then perhaps ask, "Tell me your reasons for agreeing?"<br>"Tell me something else you've noted" (if an obvious, or already offered, point has already been said).<br>"How is that connected to what was said before?"<br>"What does this sentence/paragraph mean?" This question technique can be used as a main theme, discussing and explaining each short paragraph. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2. | Making sure there is a good level of class understanding. | "I'm seeking students to point out any bigger terms in the case study text."<br>"What business concepts or ideas does the case study illustrate?"<br>The instructor explains a term or may choose to get students to work on this, adding further information as needed.<br>The instructor needs to be attentive to language efforts by international students; explaining English language concepts and idioms is often beneficial to all students. |
| 3. | Eliciting knowledge of core concepts. | "Which of our key business concepts do you see in the case study?"<br>The instructor can ask any questions of interest one at a time to elicit various responses that can be further commented on and gathered into a fuller and better answer.<br>"What do students see in the case study about… [any one of] marketing, finance, production, manufacturing, retail, supply chains, staffing, accounts and payroll…?" |
| 4. | Implicit comparison to tap students' present understanding. | "What is the strength of this business?"<br>"What are the risks for this business?"<br>"How would you address weaknesses and make use of the strength(s) if you were put in charge?"<br>Gently challenging with further follow-up questions guides students' thinking and can enliven discussion about one strategy or another. |
| 5. | Drawing out omissions and bias. | "What is the writer of the case study *not* telling us?"<br>"What seems to be the writer's angle or purpose—how might that be distorting what they write?"<br>"What would a fuller account show?"<br>"Bluntly, what is *missing* from this case study we would need to know to act on it?"<br>The instructor reminds students that this is a piece of journalism. We are not looking at the raw form of the business. |

Table 1. Actions and discussion questions.

With greater instructor confidence, *ad hoc* questions and possible answers and new suggestions about the text can be invented in the moment, responding to students' comments about the content of the MCS. This allows the instructor to steer the discussion in the preferred direction towards the learning objectives and appropriate level of detail without derailing student willingness to participate.

### *Debriefing the exercise*

Summing up helps students connect what this MCS article has shown to previous MCS and the class concepts we have examined together, and to compare different case studies. This reinforces the learning and builds a broader perspective on the business world. Students commonly find debriefs interesting. Those students disinclined to participate in summing up have at least had the multiple interactions with the micro exercise which avoid the need to confront their reluctance. In any case, the formative discussion often overcomes this reluctance by eliciting positive comments from engaged students. At the end of the session, some students may want to individually debrief, seeking more detail or sharing an aspect of their own work environment.

Potential limits need to be acknowledged for those running these MCS exercises to make sure they are run successfully. An instructor may fail to use the structure of allocated time or a schema of questions to be addressed, even briefly, and may lose the narrative of change. As

always with discussion, instructors should be alert to dominant or loud students gaining control of the conversation at the expense of other students. Politically polarised students can sometimes disrupt and resist more even-handed debates. Instructors should encourage students to change their assertions to questions so they free themselves to learn new things. Having the humility to be comfortable with the limits of your own knowledge needs to be turned into modelling—in the classroom interaction itself—the desirable characteristic of being open to new ideas.

*Possible alternative uses of MCS*

Alternative uses of micro case studies include:

- Group exercises: Micro case studies are adaptable as more conventional group class exercises, especially for larger class cohorts.
- Summative tests: A case study attached to a test or examination can assess comprehension, using similar questions to and echoing the familiar previous class MCS discussions.
- Comparison: Two case studies can be used as a "constant comparison" for more advanced groups—perhaps with one emphasising legal or financial implications while the other focuses on marketing or supply chain logistics (Smith & McKeever, 2015).
- Online: During COVID-19, I applied the logic of this exercise to online iterations of a related course. There, rather than micro cases studies, short weekly readings used a similar mix of questions and responses as the interactive base for developing student interest and active learning. Online materials work equally well if students can see be seen with laptop cameras turned on and are participating.

## CONCLUSION

Using micro case studies offers instructors an additional tool in their teaching enterprise. Their benefits include convenient size, adaption on the fly, engaging students, and localising general course principles. Pedagogically, the use of MCS fits dialogic learning focused on what the learner is learning rather than requiring professorial levels of instructional knowledge. This exercise can be conducted by new and less experienced instructors. A minimal knowledge base is sufficient, letting instructors grow their skills as they present and explore the case studies with students. Using guiding questions draws out students' ideas, inviting them to integrate their understanding of how businesses function into the discussion without the instructor needing to disclose or rely on their own degree of understanding. More experienced teachers will bring general knowledge, business and industry stories, and other examples to this to-and-fro of classroom dialogue as teacher and students jointly analyse the information presented. In this way, content and communication come together in active student engagement and learning.

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