Influence of personality and motivation on case method teaching

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of the individual characteristics of students and teachers in the effectiveness of the case method in a sample of Colombian business students. The results from two studies indicated that the case method is as effective as the lecture method in respect of learning outcomes (i.e. declarative knowledge and situation analysis) and is related to the higher satisfaction of students (i.e. pedagogic strategies and the relation between students and the professor); however, its effects can be mediated and moderated by some personality traits of the teachers and students (conscientiousness, openness to experience, and extroversion) and by the students’ motivation (social motivation). Case method is effective for promoting educational outcomes, and its usage is not just recommended for senior students but, as we have found, it is also recommended for junior students who can improve both their declarative knowledge and situation analysis skills with this method.

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1. Introduction

The case method (CM) was developed in the first half of the twentieth century. Since the 1970s it has quickly spread across North American business schools and is now the most widely recognized and accepted learning method in MBA programmes. Because of its popularity, several studies have investigated the effectiveness of the method, and they have generally reported that the CM improves educational outcomes1 (Booth, 2000; Noblitt, Vance, & DePoy Smith, 2010; Sanders-Smith, Smith-Bonahue, & Soutullo, 2016; Watson & Sutton, 2012; Yadav, Lundeberg, & DeSchryver, 2007), but these positive results are limited by four shortcomings: (a) CM studies generally focus only on one protagonist of the teaching-learning process (i.e. either teachers or students); (b) most studies do not consider individual characteristics, such as personality, motivation or attitudes, in their analyses (e.g. Watson & Sutton, 2012); (c) the studies generally focus on single learning indicators (e.g. only oral communication or class satisfaction); and (d) most research on the CM has been conducted in North American universities with few reports in other cultural contexts (Burgoyne & Mumford, 2001). Therefore, in this study we addressed these limitations by examining the effectiveness of the CM in a sample of Colombian business students, where we examined the influence of personality, motivation and teacher-student interaction on different educational outcomes and how those personal characteristics (from both teachers and students) can influence teaching.

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1 In this article, we defined educational outcomes as detailed descriptions of what students must be able to do or know at the end of a course.
The remainder of our article is structured as follows. The ensuing section presents the main characteristics of the CM in business education and the next section develops hypotheses about CM effectiveness and the influence of the personal characteristics of teachers and students on such effectiveness. We then explain the methodology and present the empirical data used for testing the hypotheses. Finally, the results of the empirical analysis are discussed and their implications for both practice and research are presented.

1.1. Learning methods in business education

The problems the students of today face in the classroom are not necessarily similar to those they encounter in their working life, where the problems are far more complex, unstructured and have conflicting objectives, and they may occur in a variety of shapes (Yadav, Shaver, & Meckl, 2010). Because of this, in the last few decades the approaches to teaching have changed (Gibbs, 2013b), from those oriented only to the content, or teacher-centred, to approaches orientated to the learning, or student-centred (Kember, 1997). Experiential learning is an example. This theory describes how experience is transformed into learning through a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Knowledge is created as a student endures a transformational experience as opposed to reading about it in a textbook or listening to a lecture (Kolb, 1984).

Teacher-centred methods are characterized by a verbal transmission of content from the teacher to the student. With these methods the knowing agent is the teacher, who transmits knowledge to the students, and the memorization of content is encouraged. Some research states that when students have no experience with a topic teacher-centred methods can contribute to the acquisition of the required knowledge and the connection between the concepts (Dochy, Segers, Van den Bossche, & Gijbels, 2003), especially in introductory courses (Nadkarni, 2003). These methods favour the memorization of knowledge that can be evaluated with relative simplicity in educational settings, but they have shortcomings in the transfer when applied to learning environments (Tynjälä, 1999).

On the other side, student-centred methods are focused on collaborative dialogue processes (instructor-student and student-student). Specifically, the business CM mimics or simulates a real situation that has three characteristics: 1) it covers a topic or topics significant to the business context, 2) it provides sufficient information on which to base conclusions, and 3) it provides no definitive conclusions (Ellet, 2007). The CM is defined as the “depiction (in words or video) of a situation, specifically written for development purposes, which exists or existed within an organization. Learners read (or watch on video/film) and analyze what has happened (in the case). “Subsequently they present, debate, defend, discuss and critique the analysis, with tutors [sic] and fellow learners, in a variety of ways, such as interaction in pairs, groups or full plenary sessions” (Burgoyne & Mumford, 2001, p. 9). Although CM have some common points with other teaching methods as the experiential learning theory (Gibbs, 2013a), and despite being born within an academic setting, did not respond to a specific theoretical orientation, and its development has been mostly intuitive with not much empirical research about the direct effects of this method (Burgoyne & Mumford, 2001).

1.2. Case method effects

Different researchers have reported a wide variety of positive effects of the CM on various educational outcomes. These include the improvement of higher thinking skills (Bergland, Lundeberg, & Klyczek, 2006; Carlson & Schodt, 1995; Dori, Tal, & Tsauhu, 2003), deeper learning (Boyce, Williams, Kelly, & Yee, 2001), the learning of core competencies (Weil, Oyelere, & Rainsbury, 2004), improvement of oral communication (Noblitt, Vance, & Smith, 2010), motivation to learn information and apply the knowledge learned to unknown problems (Böcker, 1987), the ability to ask questions and diagnose situations, and the ability to integrate theory with practice and decision making (Burgoyne & Mumford, 2001).

However, other lines of research state that depending on the course’s educational objective, some teaching methods can be more or less effective (Anderson et al., 2001), for example, Elmore have stated that conventional pedagogy (lecture method), has an emphasis on factual information, but the objective of CM is to construct knowledge, and “students do so by engaging, with other students and with the teacher, in a process of inquiry, critical discourse, and problem solving” (Elmore, 1991, p. xii). Ellet (2007) also highlight that memorization is the primary skill of the lecture model, and inference is the primary skill of the case model, and Dooley and Skinner (1977) have stated that the CM is not appropriate for the improvement of all educational outcomes; if the course’s learning objective is limited to acquiring knowledge or recalling concepts (declarative knowledge), the effectiveness of the CM will be low, and other methods (e.g. traditional lectures) will outperform the CM as lecture methods promote the memorization of facts, rules, relations and concepts in a task domain. On the other hand, the CM will outperform a traditional lecture method when the course’s educational objective is related to the analysis of different scenarios and decision making (procedural knowledge), as the main objective of the CM is the discussion of the steps, procedures, sequences and actions required to solve a managerial problem. Evidence of this reasoning have been reported in a sample of MBA students by Othman, Poon, and Ho (2012), whom found that lecture method is more efficient than CM for the learning of declarative knowledge; on the other hand, Yoo and Park (2014) in a sample of graduate nurses reported that CM is more effective for the improvement of problem solving than the lecture method. Because of these results we expected that students exposed to the CM would perform better on situation analysis than those students who are exposed to a lecture method. In addition, we expected that students exposed to a traditional lecture method would perform better on declarative knowledge than those students exposed to the CM.
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