ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION IN CASE DISCUSSIONS: A COMPARISON OF THE MICA AND THE HARVARD CASE METHODS

Ramarao Desiraju
University of Central Florida

C. Gopinath
Suffolk University

"What can I do to influence my students to be more involved in the subject material?" This question frequently arises during informal discussion among faculty when someone has had a bad teaching day. One of the popular tools available to address this problem is case analysis. In addition to being used widely across functional areas such as marketing, finance, and management, cases are written to accommodate several of the following audiences: under-graduates, graduates, and executives.

Casual observation reveals considerable variation in the manner in which faculty conduct these case discussions. For instance, some instructors clearly specify the case questions prior to discussion, whereas others do not. Some direct the case discussion along the specified questions, whereas others take a more nondirective approach and let the class decide the focus of discussion; some frequently cold call students to ensure preparation, whereas others limit

their attention to those who volunteer to discuss the issues. Clearly, there are many approaches to conducting a case discussion.

Given the variation in approaches, it seems important to determine the conditions favoring the use of one approach over another. In particular, the literature has clearly identified two distinct approaches that can be employed to conduct case discussions. One is the traditional approach (Christensen, 1989), which we will refer to throughout the article as the Harvard Case Method (HCM). The other is the relatively newer McAleer Interactive Case Analysis (MICA) method (McAleer, 1976; McAleer & Hale, 1992; Siciliano & McAleer, 1997). Our goal in this article is to present and discuss a systematic comparison of these two competing approaches.

Although both claim to involve students in learning the course subject matter, there is no empirical evidence that the MICA method is better or worse than HCM. In this article, we present the findings from an experimental comparison of two groups of undergraduate retail management students, in which the method of conducting case discussion is different for each group. The following section summarizes the relative strengths of the two methods and specifies the research hypotheses. The subsequent sections present the details of the experiment and our results. The last section discusses the implications of our results.

MICA versus HCM

Here, we discuss three relevant issues, albeit briefly. First, we review the underlying reasons for adopting case discussions. Next, we discuss the challenges in using HCM effectively. Finally, we highlight the key reasons why MICA may eliminate some of the weaknesses of HCM.

CASE DISCUSSIONS AND ACTIVE LEARNING

A case is defined as a factual account of human experience, centered on a problem or issue faced by a person, a group of persons, or an organization (Fisher, 1978, p. 262). The use of case discussion to learn problem-solving techniques originated in law schools. The Harvard Business School adopted and popularized this method for use in the business courses (Christensen, 1989). The case captures a segment of reality by giving a detailed description of the events that occurred and thereby provides a framework within which a healthy discussion of the key business issues can occur. The traditional case discussion method is a Socratic approach to learning wherein the instructor raises issues (or asks the students to raise issues) and then challenges the stu-

dents by forcing them to justify their views using the facts of the case and/or their analysis for this purpose.

Broadly, case discussions fall within the rubric of active learning. Active learning has been defined as anything that "involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). The principles of active learning recommend that there is a need for the student to be involved in the learning process to internalize the learning that occurs. Several studies in the literature argue in favor of the benefits of the case discussion as a participative method of learning, as compared with passive methods such as lecturing. Conducting a case discussion, however, requires special skills. As Christensen and Hansen (1987) point out, "A lecture can be a work of art . . . discussion teaching is an even more complicated task."

Both the students and the instructor play important roles in ensuring the success of this method (Lundberg, 1993). First, consider the instructor's role. When using cases, the instructor needs to perceive his or her role as one promoting student learning rather than an expert teaching the right way, as in a lecture. This involves relinquishing a certain amount of control in the classroom (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Moreover, the instructor needs to be skilled in leading the discussion by asking the right questions at the right time and directing the comments of the individual as well as the discussion of the class toward the issues of consequence. Then, students are likely to develop an understanding of the context and the required analytical skills for dealing with a class of business problems. Therefore, achieving the desired learning objectives through case discussions rests critically on the instructor.

Next, consider the role of the students. For the method to be successful, students should have read and prepared the case prior to coming to class. They should have made an attempt both to identify the key issues and to analyze the data provided in the case. Furthermore, students should be sufficiently motivated to speak up in class. To participate effectively, they also need skills of listening to the discussion in class so as to make a positive contribution at the right junctures, by either supporting or contradicting the comments of their peers.

It is important to recognize the link between participation and learning. Based on an extensive review of the literature on learning, Knowles (1990) terms it "an elusive phenomenon." This reflects the multidimensional nature of learning. Harris and Schwann (1991) suggest that one comprehensive way of viewing learning is as both a process and a product. The process aspect of learning emphasizes what happens during the learning experience (for instance, the nature of the case discussion). The product aspect of learning, by contrast, places emphasis on the result of the learning experience (for

instance, the careful application of a concept in a business setting). Keeping these dimensions in mind, we use the following two definitions for expositional convenience.

Active participation is defined as the set of activities on the part of the student that will lead to a successful case discussion. This set of activities includes effort toward case preparation prior to class discussion, practicing active listening, and speaking up in class to defend one's own opinion as well as to question another student's opinion.

Objective learning refers to how well a student internalized the essential learning objectives of a case.

Note that active participation and objective learning tap into the process and product dimensions of learning, respectively. Using these definitions, we can summarize our discussion as follows: When compared with other methods of instruction, such as lecturing, the goal of case discussions is to generate a higher level of active participation, which in turn is expected to result in a higher level of objective learning.

Challenges in using HCM. Given the above necessary conditions for success, it is not surprising that instructors have found some difficulty in using HCM. In particular, the requirements placed on students sometimes turn out to be a tall order. First, consider the requirement that students need to be comfortable speaking in class and being challenged by their peers or the instructor to defend their views. Students who have been through schooling systems that did not encourage such communication methods tend to feel inhibited in speaking up, especially with the instructor at the front of the class. Furthermore, many students do not usually have any training in actively listening to their peers.

Next, grading is an area that causes confusion to students. Some students may participate in the sense that they often speak up in class, but their comments may not be relevant to the main issues of the case. Because students often mistake frequency of participation for quality of contribution, they are surprised when class participation grades are announced. The pressure to make a point in class because it counts toward a grade leads to several strategies on the part of students that may have little to do with learning (Cohen, 1973). A related issue is on how the instructor determines the participation grade. Usually, the instructor is encouraged to record grades for each student after class. This hinges on the instructor accurately recalling the comments made during the entire discussion. Moreover, peer- and self-assessment of class participation have not been shown to be reliable alternatives to instructor assessment (Gopinath, 1999). These problems, along with the poor feed-

back given to students, have resulted in arguments to do away with grading altogether (Gilson, 1994).

A sample of other problems arising in case discussion is given here: Students come unprepared to the class and attempt to wing it based on the comments of their peers. Class discussions often deteriorate to a dialog between the instructor and a few students rather than a general discussion among the students that is directed by the instructor. And, for some students, the anxiety of being called on by the instructor for an opinion may constrain their learning (Bernhardt, 1991). This may lead such students to be silent throughout the discussion or become resentful for being made the focus of the class.

Given such issues, undergraduate students in particular often find the learning process in a case discussion unstructured and rather ambiguous. Most important, they are not sure what it is they are learning (or have learned) through this approach. This ambiguity often leads to less active participation and poses a serious challenge to the objectives of HCM. A perception of these difficulties has led to a search for methods that would restructure the case discussion process.

To that end, some faculty have increased the role of the students by making one group of students present the case while another group provides a critique, taking up the bulk of class time (Eisenbeis, 1994). Other methods include asking students to submit position outlines (short write-ups) to stimulate class discussion and ensure a closer reading of the material (Paquette & Voyer, 1996). Some instructors resort to cold calling and putting students on the mat in the early sessions as a signal to other students (Charan, 1976). Many of these methods seem to make marginal adjustments to the preparation and conduct of the case without being an alternative approach to HCM. One alternative that is significantly different from the HCM on several dimensions is the MICA method, initially proposed by McAleer (1976).

MICA method. This method was proposed as an alternative approach to case discussion that improves student participation and learning. The method aims to (a) reduce the need for a high level of instructor skill in conducting case discussions, (b) increase relevant student participation in the class through structuring discussion around previously identified issues, and (c) specify precise criteria for the student and the instructor to follow in evaluating class participation in a manner that reflects the skills intended to be developed. Here, we offer a skeletal outline of the method as employed in our study. For a more comprehensive discussion of the MICA method, please see Siciliano and McAleer (1997).

The method has three distinct sets of activities that differentiate it from the HCM. The first set occurs prior to the class discussion; the second set deals

with the actual conduct of the discussion; and the third deals with the evaluation of student participation. Consider the activities that occur prior to the discussion. For each case that is assigned, a team of students volunteers to administer the case discussion. The remaining students submit action steps to this administrative team prior to the day of the class discussion. An example of an action step is the following: "Hill's should increase the space allotted to soft goods in its stores by 20%." The action step does not include any justification for the proposed action; the students provide justification later during the class discussion. The administrative team collates the action steps and decides on the order in which to discuss them. The team makes copies of the listing and distributes it to students on the scheduled day. The members of the administrative team change from case to case, giving all students an equal opportunity to be a part of that team.

During class, the instructor sits at the rear of the class, and the administrative team conducts the discussion. The team begins by inviting those students who submitted the most interesting (or controversial) action steps to justify their recommendations. After these students justify their action steps, other students indicate by a show of hands that they want to add to the discussion. A part of the administrative team keeps track of how many times each student has spoken and uses that information to call on individuals who raised their hands but have not spoken as frequently as others. The goal of the administrative team is to give all students an equal opportunity to participate without favoring some individuals over others. When one action step is discussed in sufficient detail, the issue is put to a vote, and a majority takes the class decision. Then, the team moves to other action steps on the list. The instructor, meanwhile, evaluates each comment as it is made and records the evaluation on a seating chart. Furthermore, the instructor may use his or her discretion to selectively intervene and ensure that the discussion is on track. The administrative team does not evaluate or respond to the comments being made by the students; instead, it simply administers the process.

At the end of the discussion, the instructor provides immediate feedback to the students in terms of both the issues that were (or were not) discussed as well as the participation scores of the individual students. These scores are posted immediately after class, giving the students a numerical feedback on their participation and a cumulative indication of their grade. The scoring is based on precise criteria that are provided to the students and are designed to encourage listening to others comments, reward outside research, and use of analytical concepts in the arguments. For a complete set of grading criteria, please see the appendix in Siciliano and McAleer (1997).

This approach is intended to reduce the ambiguity that students often experience in the HCM. Submitting an action step gives each student an

opportunity to be called on for his or her opinion on that action, thereby maximizing his or her opportunity to score points. Other students then add to or critique what has been said. Therefore, students who try to wing it are not likely to add much to the discussion and will be graded accordingly. By making students submit action steps, the method forces students to read and think about the case material in advance. By removing the instructor from the center of the class, it encourages students to participate without much inhibition. By basing the discussion on the action steps, it keeps the class focused on the decisions to be taken. By providing clear criteria that reward active participation, the method reduces ambiguity in grading and tends to enhance learning. Because the instructor is evaluating the comments as they are made, errors due to improper recall are minimized.

Our search of the literature showed several discussions based on anecdotal evidence but almost no empirical examination of the merits of case discussion or of the various methods. We have used both the HCM and the MICA methods in our classes and have been comfortable with both. Although the MICA method seems to generate more active participation, we wished to study this impact in a more systematic manner. Thus, we sought to explore empirically whether the nature of class discussion of cases affected active participation and whether it made a difference to objective learning. More formally, our hypotheses are as follows:

> *Hypothesis 1:* The MICA method will result in a greater level of active participation than the HCM method.
> *Hypothesis 2:* The MICA method will result in a greater level of objective learning than the HCM method.

Our hypothesis on active participation deals with the process aspect of learning, whereas the hypothesis on objective learning deals with the product (or content) aspect of learning. In this sense, our study addresses both dimensions of learning as conceptualized by previous research. We discuss the relevant measurement issues in the next section.

Method

Recently, one of the authors was scheduled to teach two sections of an undergraduate retailing management course in the same semester. Because case discussion constituted a large portion of the course, it was decided that an opportunity existed for testing the relative efficacy of the HCM and MICA methods. Accordingly, this study was undertaken to compare the two approaches.

	HCM	MICA
Number of students	33	31
Gender, males	30%	29%
Work experience (hours per week), mean	10.8	11.75
Cumulative credits, mean	117	112
Final course grade point average	3.13	3.05

The experiment. Students registered for the sections based on their usual criteria of convenience of the meeting time of the classes and potential conflicts with the meeting time for other classes. No attempt was made to influence the registration process. Based on a coin toss, one section was assigned to the HCM treatment and the other to the MICA treatment. Subjects were 64 undergraduate students, of which 33 were in the MICA section and the remaining in the HCM section. About one third of the students in each section had experience with case analyses and discussion. The rest of the students did not have any prior experience with case analyses. Note that this course is an elective and is taken by undergraduate students in either their junior or senior year. The profiles of students in each of the sections suggest that there are no significant differences across groups, in terms of background information (see Table 1).

Both sections used the same textbook, course outline, and schedule, meeting twice each week on the same days. The students discussed nine Harvard Business School Cases dealing with retailing during the semester. The sequence in which the cases were discussed, the type of retailer they dealt with, and a brief name (in parentheses) of the case are provided here: (a) discount department stores (Hill's); (b) car dealerships (Carter's Auto); (c) supermarkets (ValuPlus); (d) office supply stores (Staples); (e) catalog retailers (King-Size); (f) other nonstore retailers (CUC International); (g) department stores (Randall's); (h) off-price retailers (Filene's); and (i) specialty stores (Talbots).

Collectively, the cases highlighted several important retail management issues and provided an opportunity for students to improve their analytical skills while gaining a better understanding of retailing. Toward the end of the semester, after all the cases were discussed, a questionnaire was administered in class to the two sections of students without prior notice. The students were assured that their responses on the questionnaire would not in any way affect

their final course grades. This was credibly guaranteed by sealing their responses in an envelope and making one of the students turn it in to the department office to be given to the instructor only after the course grading was completed.

The measures. The questionnaire was composed of several 7-point itemized rating scales, with anchor verbal descriptions; for example, 1 (*to a lesser extent*) to 7 (*to a greater extent*). Active participation was measured through a set of seven items covering case preparation and participation. These items were developed to capture issues related to preparation for the case prior to class and participation in the discussion during class. Furthermore, the items address the deficiencies in teaching with HCM, as discussed in the previous section. The items included the following: reading the case, analyzing the data, seeking additional information, speaking frequently in class, listening to others, using case details in participation, and using marketing concepts in participation.

Objective learning was measured as specified below. Of the nine cases discussed, five were selected for the purpose of this measure. The selected cases were discussed at different points in the semester, and each case had a relatively unambiguous (but different) focus. Two of the cases were discussed late in the semester, two were discussed early in the semester, and one case was discussed near the midpoint of the semester. For each case, the student was given five alternative foci of the case and was asked to rate each on the degree to which it was the main focus of the case, from 1 (*to a lesser extent*) to 7 (*to a greater extent*). The foci were as follows: (a) formulating a retail strategy, (b) implementing a retail strategy, (c) retail pricing, (d) retail growth and expansion, and (e) non–store retailing. By design, each case presented on the questionnaire had only one main focus, and the students' ratings on that particular choice were taken as a measure of objective learning for that case.

Our use of recall of case focus needs additional explanation. Progress of learning is often reflected in the retention of material learned. A popular way of measuring retention is through aided recall (also called recall with cues[1]) of any relevant material. In many research areas, including language training (recall of vocabulary and using the recalled words) and music (humming a tune or writing musical notation based on recall), recall with cues is extensively used for measuring retention (Travers, 1977). In this method, the person must not only retrieve information stored in the memory but also provide an output related to it. We too provide the students with cues (e.g., "The Hill's case" is a cue). Given that cue, the learner in our setting retrieves the case context stored in memory (e.g., "The key point of discussion was whether to increase the percentage of soft goods").

Now consider why retention of the case context is intimately linked to the content aspect of learning (e.g., "The percentage of soft goods issue is mainly concerned with the implementation of a retail strategy"). In general, any case conveys one or more concepts in a business context so students can better appreciate the application of each concept along with any limitations. Clearly, content knowledge is internalized when a student develops an understanding of the types of situations in which a concept can be applied. Because he or she is introduced to a concept by making use of a context, the student is expected to remember not just the concept but also the context in which it is applied.[2] Therefore, the case method depends critically on the episodic memory of the learner. Consequently, objective learning, as operationalized in our article, is an appropriate measure of student learning of the course material.

Next, we also measured students' subjective perception of learning through a single-item 7-point scale, 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), seeking student response on the usefulness of case discussions in applying retailing concepts to a real-life situation. Finally, to obtain an additional measure of student learning (i.e., other than through student self-report data), we considered performance in written exams and class participation during the course. Each of the exams involved a written analysis of a case. Because the case discussions during the semester would contribute to students' skills of analysis, we believe these provide an independent measure of learning.

The analysis. The data analysis was conducted using the PROC GLM procedure in SAS for a one-factor (two levels), between-subjects design, with multiple dependent measures. The output from the analysis is summarized in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

Results

To address Hypothesis 1, we compared the mean responses of the students in the two classes on the level of active participation (i.e., questions related to preparing for the case and participating in class discussion). These results are reported in Table 2. On each dimension of active participation, the students in the MICA class felt that the nature of class discussion helped them to prepare and participate to a greater extent than students in the HCM class. In particular, the differences in favor of the MICA method were statistically significant for reading the case more thoroughly, speaking more frequently in class, and using the case details while participating.

TABLE 2
Impact of Method in Comparing the Harvard Case Method and the McAleer Interactive Case Analysis Method

	HCM	MICA
As part of your preparation, to what extent did the nature of class discussion encourage you to		
1. Read case more carefully	5.03	5.72***
2. Analyze the case data more thoroughly	5.16	5.60
3. Seek additional data about the case	3.13	3.64
4. Speak more frequently in class	4.77	5.48**
5. Listen to others and consider their opinions when voicing your own	5.68	6.06
6. Use case details while participating in class	5.29	5.91**
7. Use knowledge of marketing concepts and theories	5.03	5.51
Overall, I found the case discussions useful in applying retailing concepts to a real life situation	5.29	5.36

$**p < .10. ***p < .05.$

TABLE 3
Recall of Case Content in Comparing the Harvard Case Method With the McAleer Interactive Case Analysis Method

		HCM		MICA	
Case	Focus of the Case	Main focus	Other issues	Main focus	Other issues
Hill's	Formulating a retail strategy	5.16	4.33	5.03	4.33
Carter's Auto	Implementation of a retail strategy	4.87	4.14	5.5**	4.20
Randall's	Retail pricing	4.77	4.40	5.42	4.38
Filene's	Retail growth and expansion	5.45	4.21	5.67	4.46
King	Non–store retailing	4.43	4.57	4.79	4.81

$**p < .10.$

TABLE 4
Direct Measures of Student Learning in Comparing the Harvard Case Method With the McAleer Interactive Case Analysis Method

	HCM Mean %	MICA Mean %
Midterm exam—written case analysis	84.53	84.47
Final exam—written case analysis	83.73	84.87
Class participation for entire semester	47.13	51*

$*p < 0.29.$

To address Hypothesis 2, we analyzed student scores for the main focus of each case (main focus) along with the average for the remaining four foci (other issues). Table 3 summarizes the students' responses. In four out of the five cases, students in both sections correctly scored the main focus higher than all the other issues. This shows that students in both the groups recalled content issues reasonably accurately. When we compare the response to the main issue between the two sections, in all but one of the cases the MICA section students were able to correctly identify the main focus of the case to a greater extent than the HCM section students. Furthermore, in the case of Carter's Auto, the difference was statistically significant. This is particularly noteworthy inasmuch as the case was discussed early in the semester. Hill's was the first case discussed in the semester; on this case, the HCM class did better on the objective learning measure. However, as the MICA students got more familiar with the method, they performed consistently better than the HCM class.

As a further indicator of support for Hypothesis 2, we compared the response of the students on the extent to which they felt that the case discussions were useful in applying retailing concepts to a real-life situation (last row of Table 2). The mean score of students in the MICA class was greater than that of the HCM class. Finally, we compared the two groups using more direct measures, such as student performance on written case analyses and class participation grades (see Table 4). We can note that although the two groups performed equally well on the midterm written case-analysis, the MICA group outperformed the HCM group in the final exam. Furthermore, the MICA group had greater class participation scores than the HCM group.

Discussion and Conclusion

Case discussion is a pedagogical technique that is frequently used in a variety of business courses. One survey showed that about 94% of instructors use it at least to a slight extent in undergraduate business policy/strategy courses (Alexander, O'Neill, Snyder, & Townsend, 1986). However, very few empirical studies have examined the effectiveness of the discussion method in achieving the intended objectives. Relying on anecdotal evidence, some authors have supported its use whereas others have reported on the problems arising out of the predominant method of case discussion and have doubted its effectiveness. We have attempted to introduce a measure of rigor into this stream of work by systematically comparing alternate methods.

Our study compared two different methods of discussing cases, namely the HCM and MICA method, to examine their effect on participation and whether they help reinforce the content of the course. The analysis shows that

students in the MICA method section reported better preparation and participation benefits as compared with students in the HCM method. In addition, students in the MICA class were better able to identify the main focus of the cases discussed, showing that they were able to better recall the content issues involved in the case discussion. Thus, on both counts of content and process, the MICA method appears superior.

Instructors use case discussion in their courses as it is an established method of active learning, and cases present students an opportunity to apply their analytical skills to a real-life situation. Thus, instructors are reluctant to reduce their use of cases but constantly seek ways to enhance its learning potential. The MICA method is a step in this direction. It encourages students to prepare ahead of time by requiring them to submit action steps and develops their participation skills in class by guiding them in the intended direction.

Our study collected data from students in a marketing course. However, the nature of case discussion across several other courses such as organizational behavior and strategy operates in a similar format. Thus, we believe the results of our study are generalizable across all these courses. Although the MICA method was originally developed in a marketing course (McAleer, 1976; McAleer & Hale, 1992), it has also been adapted for use in the business policy/strategy course (Siciliano & McAleer, 1997). Due to the generic nature of its structure, the MICA method lends itself for use in courses from a variety of management disciplines.

Three points need to be noted about our approach. First, the experimental groups were equivalent in terms of several background characteristics. Next, random assignment was used to eliminate other sources of systematic bias. And the experimenter was familiar with both methods of case discussion. These features enhance the internal validity of our study. Therefore, even experienced case teachers, committed to some variant of the HCM, are likely to be interested in our results.

Successful implementation of HCM gives the instructor an active role in the class, calling on several skills including the ability to listen, ask appropriate questions to facilitate discussion, and later, recall the class session accurately for evaluation purposes. In contrast, the MICA method is structured to provoke relevant and active discussion while reducing the time in front of the class for the instructor. Thus, new case teachers may find this method less daunting. With experience, though, all instructors evolve unique styles. Even as they become more experienced, however, the unique benefits of the MICA method argue in favor of it being incorporated in perhaps some of the sessions.

There are other areas that need further examination, and it will be useful to devote some attention to these issues. Although we have used some direct measures of learning (such as written case analyses), it is possible that there may be room for instructor bias. Furthermore, our analysis relies on students' self-reported measures. Future research should be encouraged to seek other independent measures, along with a larger sample of students. Although we have taken an important step toward measuring objective learning, other aspects of learning via case discussion should also be explored. In particular, the impact of learning styles, learning development stages, and personality differences could be studied.[3] Another area that is of great interest to students is the question of fairness in grading participation. Investigating this issue, particularly using a multirater technique, will also be valuable. We hope that our work will spark further research in this important area.

Notes

1. Cues are provided to facilitate recall by indicating where to search in the memory.

2. Contrast this to a passive mode of learning, such as a lecture, where the emphasis is more on the concept and there is less reliance on the context. When a passive method such as lecturing is used, students forget as much as 50% of course content within a few months. Retention is markedly greater when learning is anchored in active learning methodologies (Garvin, 1991).

3. We thank an anonymous referee for pointing this to us.

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