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Student case development based on entrepreneurial experiences: a guide for entrepreneurship educators

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explains how entrepreneurship educators can facilitate student development of cases based on their own entrepreneurial experiences in order to stimulate reflection and create unique learning experiences (Hägg, 2021). This approach serves as an example of student-directed pedagogy in which learning processes emerge directly from students' own experiences, which has garnered increased interest in recent years among entrepreneurship educators (Hägg & Gabrielsson, 2019; Robinson et al., 2016). If executed well, this method can help students develop skills related to creative thinking, critical thinking, information literacy, analysis, problem-solving, and communication (Beal et al., 2016).

This chapter outlines the relevant theoretical background, describes a practical teaching example, and discusses how various teaching activities could expand the approach. While the practical example described here was tailored to graduate students writing cases about their own start-ups, the method allows flexibility and could be adapted to a variety of contexts and entrepreneurship classrooms. Educators can adjust assignment parameters, such as deliverables (case, teaching note, essay, presentation), grading criteria, assignment length, student organization (individual, paired, group), and type of entrepreneurial experience/activity for reflection. Such experiences are not limited to running a start-up but might include other entrepreneurial actions such as idea generation, experimentation, market research, business planning, and/or pitching (Neck et al., 2020). The educator controls the process by adjusting the assignment settings according to the context and learning objectives. The only absolute requirement is that students have some concrete entrepreneurial experience to draw upon and, ideally, some experience with the case-based method.

The idea of involving students in developing cases is not new; similar teaching methods have been described by Field (2005) in natural science, Head and Bays (2010) in nursing, Ciccotello and Green (1997) in finance, and Ashamalla and Crocitto (2001) in management and organizational behaviour. The present chapter details the method's application in the context of entrepreneurship education, particularly in contexts where students have some concrete entrepreneurial experience to draw upon.

BACKGROUND AND PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

Limitations of Case-Based Teaching

Many business schools and other institutions that teach entrepreneurship utilize traditional case-based teaching and live cases as standard pedagogical practices (Yadav et al., 2019). Although the benefits of traditional case-based teaching (Davis, 2009) and the live case method (Schultz, 2021; Tofighi, 2021) appear across a range of disciplines, the approach has also attracted some criticism (Jack, 2018; Roth & Smith, 2009). Traditional case-based teaching confines students to the analyst's role as passive observers who must respond to historical facts and events presented by a distant third party (Bailey et al., 2005). In live cases, students consult a partner firm to problem-solve a current organizational issue (Burns, 1990; Rapp & Ogilvie, 2019); a drawback is that faculty must be highly involved in live cases, and there may be instances of insufficient client commitment and motivation (Roth & Smith, 2009).

Because case-based teaching focuses on solving other companies' problems rather than understanding and defining problems (Bridgman et al., 2016; Chia, 2005), it can also limit reflection and holistic thinking (Podolny, 2009). Cases may also be contextually complex, and without the requisite experience and domain knowledge of the industry or challenge in question, students are likely to be unduly passive (Mostert, 2007; Roth & Smith, 2009). The cases used in teaching are typically written by faculty or partner firms, but why not allow students themselves to author their own cases?

The Student-Written, Instructor-Facilitated (SWIF) Case-Learning Method

First introduced by Swiercz (1998), the student-written, instructor-facilitated (SWIF) case-learning method addresses criticisms of case-based teaching by taking student involvement one step further. Following the SWIF model, students develop their cases without pre-written constraints, converting case-based learning into an active experience requiring students to assume a range of new roles beyond analysts of a given case. Instead, students take on more active roles as researchers, petitioners, interviewers, negotiators, writers, editors, and team members (if working in groups) (Bailey et al., 2005). In developing cases, students are challenged to think in new and unexpected ways (Prud'homme-Généreux, 2015), learning to tolerate ambiguity, distinguish between the significant and the trivial, and develop critical

thinking skills (Beal et al., 2016). In short, the SWIF method allows students to move beyond the role of case analyst to that of active case developer (Swiercz, 2003).

Known Challenges of SWIF Case Learning

Although SWIF case learning is more activating and authentic than case-based teaching, the SWIF method also presents some challenges. For example, when Tarter and Beal (2013) implemented the SWIF case-learning method in a college capstone strategy course requiring students to write cases for third-party companies, they encountered difficulties in finding relevant companies. They also noted struggles in identifying case topics for writing that facilitated student engagement. Identifying the internal difficulties faced by third-party companies can also prove challenging as students are not involved in the company's development, reducing the authenticity of the SWIF case-learning experience.

SWIF Case Learning in Entrepreneurship Education

SWIF case learning addresses the above challenges in entrepreneurship education settings by inviting students to develop cases linked to their own entrepreneurial experiences, eliminating the need to find a third-party company as a basis for case development. This context makes it easier for students to identify a topic to write about and may increase student engagement by stimulating reflection on authentic entrepreneurial experiences and actions (Hägg & Gabrielsson, 2019; Neck et al., 2020). Researchers have extensively discussed the positive impacts of this kind of active reflection on entrepreneurial learning (see Deacon & Harris, 2011; Lindh & Thorgren, 2016; Neck & Greene, 2011; Neck et al., 2014). To ensure that students have the requisite authentic experiences for active reflection, Hägg (2021) stressed that entrepreneurial activities should include peer interactions and other social contacts.

A Practical Example

The teaching example described here refers to an activity at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, NTNU) during the springs of 2020 and 2021 with two groups of entrepreneurship students (44 in 2020 and 40 in 2021). These students were enrolled in a cross-disciplinary graduate venture creation programme (Lackéus & Middleton, 2015), initiating real start-ups as part of their formal studies. In the first semester of the programme, the students screen potential business ideas and form venture teams of two to five students. These new ventures are developed in semesters two, three, and four, supported by relevant courses on entrepreneurship.

Case development assignment

Over 3 weeks at the end of the second semester, the assignment challenges students to develop a case based on their 5-month-old start-up; each start-up submits one case. We acknowledge that 3 weeks is a relatively short amount of time to complete this assignment; a time frame that was any shorter could diminish the quality of the cases produced and create unnecessary stress in the reflection process.

The assignment

'During the second semester, your venture team has experienced situations where you have made challenging business decisions with a high degree of uncertainty. In this case development assignment, your start-up team will reflect on these situations, identify an experienced challenge or important decision-making event, and describe this scenario in a case format. As a team, you are encouraged to be creative in how you communicate and design your case.'

GENERAL APPROACH AND TEACHING MOMENTS

The following 'how-to' guide provides step-by-step guidelines for the case development assignment. The guide serves as an example based on experience with the entire learning process, from introducing the assignment to evaluating the cases created.

It is important to note that the following example could be implemented in any entrepreneurship classroom and tailored to the educator's context, schedule, and learning objectives. Case development can work at different levels (undergraduate or graduate) within a range of timelines, individually or in groups. The only absolute requirement for success is that students have a particular entrepreneurial experience to draw upon; ideally, students will also have experience with the case method.

Step 1: Introducing the Assignment (100 Minutes)

Based on our experience, the assignment introduction should include insights into the case development method. This step can be completed in person or online. The session structure is flexible, with the following example representing one possible approach.

(a) Describe the assignment and explain how it links to the overall course learning outcomes. Present the specific learning goals and your expectations for the assignment.

(b) Specify the target audience for the cases to be developed. We recommend that cases be targeted to students at the same educational level, making it easier for them to understand the assignment expectations and how the developed cases can be used for prospective students.

(c) Emphasize the importance of identifying and selecting only *one* focal topic when writing the case. Linking case development to authentic experience will increase student ownership of the assignment.

(d) Present and discuss how individual and group reflection on concrete experiences and actions can facilitate learning in entrepreneurship education (Hägg, 2021; Hägg & Gabrielsson, 2019; Kassean et al., 2015). This discussion can strengthen students' understanding of why case development facilitates reflection and learning. Our students use weekly written diaries and oral feedback from peers and teachers to practise individual and group reflection. If students are unfamiliar with the practice of reflecting on concrete experiences, more time should be set aside here.

(e) Choose two different cases to teach. We used two cases created by previous students to illustrate different structures, narratives, and formats for organizing and writing a case. We have found that many students are unfamiliar with case learning. The task can seem

overwhelming at first, and students need to gain first-hand experience with cases (Tarter & Beal, 2013). We suggest comparing and discussing two different cases as an excellent way of framing expectations. At the end of each case, we completed a 10–15-minute debrief, asking students to identify case elements that worked well and those that could be improved. Here, we encouraged students to keep their reflections in mind when developing their cases.

(f)   Our suggestion is to explain how a case is typically structured. By introducing this structure after point (e), students experience and discuss case teaching before learning about the theoretical foundations of the case structure. In our context, we explained that the first part of the case usually introduces the narrative and provides a context for debate and development by posing the core problem: what do we want to solve or decide? We then introduced different possible media formats (plain text, video, podcast, PowerPoint, or some combination of these) and shared general tips for case writing. The case format can be adjusted to suit the context, learning goals, degree of flexibility, and student group.

(g)   We recommend offering a clear overview of time schedules and assignment evaluation criteria.

(h)   It can be helpful to provide some examples of possible case topics to get students thinking. It is also advisable to round off the introduction with a Q&A session.

Step 2: Student Research Phase (1 Week)

This step ensures that each team has time to identify and reflect on a concrete entrepreneurial experience, challenge, or decision-making event from their start-up. We set aside 1 week for this research phase, which is entirely student-driven, allowing a high level of autonomy.

Step 3: Supervision by Faculty (20 Minutes per Group)

As with any other assignment, supervision and feedback are essential when helping students to write cases. This assistance is particularly important with SWIF learning, which tends to be a new and unfamiliar exercise for students (Prud'homme-Généreux, 2013). Proper supervision by faculty ensures that all student teams stay on track when getting underway.

In our example, each student team received 20 minutes of one-on-one supervised time. To encourage them to take responsibility for their learning, we found it essential to communicate that the students were in charge, setting the agenda based on their findings in Step 2.

To begin, each team presented their initial ideas, including a case study topic and a plan for developing their first draft. This step allowed faculty to provide feedback on the overall vision and the most appropriate format for the case. Some instructors may require all teams to submit cases in a single preferred form, limiting creativity and diversity but permitting easier evaluation and grading.

Following supervision, students should have a clear plan for developing their case (Prud'homme-Généreux, 2015). While this supervisory process may seem time-consuming, it is a critical step in ensuring successful case development because it helps shape the case struc-

ture and allows faculty to provide guidance on completing the assignment. If the supervision session is effective, instructors are rarely called upon during the next step.

Step 4: Planning and Developing the Case (11 Days)

Once supervision is complete, the teams can develop their cases, working autonomously with little involvement from faculty members, who should only participate when asked for guidance or additional supervision.

Step 5: Submitting the Case

Eleven days after the supervision session, the teams submit their cases for grading based upon the stated evaluation criteria. When evaluating cases, instructors can note which ones might prove helpful as teaching cases for prospective students and which ones would need additional work.

Evaluation of Written Cases

Faculty members evaluate and grade the cases, with each student group being assigned a grade. If desired, educators can incorporate strategies for acknowledging each team member's contribution and adjusting individual grades accordingly. Provisions for including 'peer evaluation' are outlined below.

EXPANDING THE ASSIGNMENT

The assignment described here ran for 3 weeks. Students might spend a longer time on this assignment or incorporate other teaching elements and activities with the proper provisions in place. Below we suggest expansions on the exercise. We have not performed these suggestions in practice but aim to discuss how various teaching activities can expand the approach.

Peer Feedback

When used appropriately, feedback in its various forms can have powerful and positive impacts on student learning and performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Winstone et al., 2017); variations include feed forward, feed up, process feedback, and peer feedback (Evans, 2013). Feedback may come from teachers or students; it can be corrective and evaluative, or it can facilitate dialogue (Warhuus et al., 2018). For the present purposes, it is useful to focus briefly on peer feedback, where students give feedback regarding both process and outcome.

Peer feedback can be understood as formative assessment (Topping, 1998) and collaborative learning, with benefits for both the student assessed and the peer assessor (Van Gennip et al., 2010). Peer feedback can also help control teachers' workload and increase the number of opportunities for feedback. Although peer feedback may be less accurate than teacher responses, this drawback can be regarded as an acceptable trade-off to the extent that it facil-

itates student progress (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Peer feedback can be included at all stages of the case development assignment. Because it may extend the assignment's duration, faculty must carefully structure peer feedback—only a limited number of students are likely to participate if the process is unstructured and voluntary.

Peer Assessment

One of the challenges of teamwork relates to assessing students' individual contributions (Anson & Goodman, 2014). Peer assessment offers one way of ensuring that students work effectively within their team (Herreid, 2001). In peer assessment (Kane & Lawler, 1978), a student (or group of students) evaluates others' assignments and possibly self-evaluates their own work. Each team member rates their colleagues anonymously at the end of the assignment, providing reasons for their evaluation and indicating what grade they feel they deserve and why (Backx, 2008).

Writing a Teaching Note

As another possible expansion of the assignment, students might be asked to write a teaching note associated with their developed case. This addition may enhance learning outcomes by allowing students to reflect on their written cases (Kolb & Kolb, 2018), thus facilitating continuous learning. In this way, students could interpret their case from an experiential perspective by reflecting on practice; the assignment then becomes an iterative, design-based process of systematic reflection. This process could help strengthen students' entrepreneurial aspirations and their communication and transformative skills and self-efficacy (Lahn & Erikson, 2016). Writing a teaching note would require further introductory faculty input to clarify its nature. Instructors should also explain how and why the teaching note enhances learning outcomes.

Teach the Case

As a final element of the assignment, students could be asked to teach their case to a student group, whether younger students in the same programme, a different group at the university, or learners at a local high school. According to the learning pyramid account, teaching others is the most effective form of learning (Treichler, 1967); teaching others is also a form of experiential learning (Dewey, 1963). By teaching a case they have written, students can test it in practice, extending their learning and perhaps inspiring other students by describing their entrepreneurial journey. In addition to gaining confidence by presenting to others, this teaching activity could help students become more aware of how best to communicate entrepreneurial challenges.

DISCUSSION

The Act of Reflecting on Entrepreneurial Experience

When using the SWIF method, the only absolute requirement for successful case development is that the students draw upon relevant entrepreneurial experiences. By enabling students to reflect on and develop cases, this approach can efficiently harness the power of reflection for entrepreneurship educators. Developing a case based on personal entrepreneurial experiences facilitates reflection, engages the student, and alleviates the challenges of developing cases for third-party companies.

However, it is essential to mention that some teams may decide to divide tasks between them. Because the student teams often have many tasks and a common interest in succeeding with the start-up and assignments, they adjust the workload where appropriate. When some students do more educational assignments, they might acquire other learning outcomes than those working more on start-up tasks. An example we experienced was that one student spent long hours finishing up a prototype while the rest of the team finalized the case development assignment. Even if we highlight the importance of the team working together on the whole assignment, it is not easy for educators to control—this is a common challenge with group assignments.

The practical example described here is limited to students working in entrepreneurial venture teams. As Hägg (2021) noted, entrepreneurial experiences should include peer interaction and other social contacts, such as experimentation with users, peer idea generation and pitching, and market research and business planning with external stakeholders. Therefore, we believe that developing cases through reflection on a range of entrepreneurial experiences can help translate concrete experiences into learning in entrepreneurship classrooms.

Student-Directed Pedagogy

The cases were based on students' own entrepreneurial experiences with their start-ups, and the assignment encouraged creative case designs. Therefore, the assignment yielded a diverse range of case topics and designs. In this example of student-directed pedagogy, learning processes emerge directly from the students' individual experiences (Hägg & Gabrielsson, 2019; Robinson et al., 2016). Table 9.1 lists some of the case topics and designs submitted by our students.

Table 9.1 confirms the diversity of case topics and designs. While student-directed pedagogies may enhance motivation and learning opportunities, educators have limited control over what is learned and how it is learned, making the work challenging to assess (Aadland, 2019). It seems likely, for instance, that the students whose video case design involved their experience of setting up an IP strategy will have reflected more on IP strategy while acquiring video development skills. Meanwhile, the students who made a podcast about shares and equity allocation in their company will have reflected more on this topic while acquiring podcast development skills.

Table 9.1   Case topics and designs

Case topic	Case design
Changing the core founding team	PowerPoint presentation with supporting audio from team members
Allocation of shares and equity	Podcast
Choosing a revenue model	Cartoon
Internationalization strategy	Text, graphs, and figures
Pivoting and changing the idea	Video and text
Choosing a linear or circular business model	Presentation/slide deck
Challenges of remote work	Role play
IP strategy	Video

In short, relinquishing control and handing over responsibility is essential when facilitating experiential and authentic learning processes (Aadland, 2019; Kassean et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2016). This decreased control was something we accepted because the primary goal of the assignment was to stimulate reflection. Dealing with graduate students, we felt comfortable sharing control and giving them responsibility for their own learning. Educators who seek to include student case development in their entrepreneurship education need to be aware of this requirement and balance control and flexibility based on their contexts.

Set Aside Time for Reflection

Entrepreneurship focuses on learning fast from failure (Ries, 2011). In support of this mindset, we would like to emphasize the importance of setting aside time to learn about, reflect on, and analyse failure (Fox et al., 2018; Pittaway & Cope, 2007). For example, by reflecting on the mistakes they made when setting up their company's equity and share structure, one group produced a well-developed case and improved the fairness of their equity and share structure. This example demonstrates how setting aside time to reflect through case development can create learning for students and practical value for their ventures.

Students Contribute to Teaching Material

Student teams can produce strong and creative case narratives, and these can serve as a valuable resource for educators for use in future courses. Educators can even cooperate with students to publish the cases; knowing that their cases may be used in future courses or published may motivate students. As another benefit, students often write in a tone that prospective students can more easily identify with, and educators may even find it helpful to invite graduates to visit in order to make classes more engaging and authentic.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CASE TEACHING PRACTICE AND REFRAMING THE CASE METHOD FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

The material presented here explains how entrepreneurship educators can help students develop cases linked to their own entrepreneurial experiences. While involving students in case development is not a new idea, applying this teaching method in entrepreneurship education represents a novel contribution.

Encouraging students to develop cases based on their own entrepreneurial experiences addresses some of the criticisms of case-based teaching mentioned earlier and can help overcome the known challenges of developing cases for third-party companies. By understanding these issues, educators can devise more active classes that will increase student involvement.

In general, students prefer to work on assignments they perceive as relevant. As entrepreneurship students tend to focus more on their entrepreneurial project or start-up than on their learning, they often remain unaware of what they have learned (Warhuus et al., 2018). The primary purpose of the case development assignment is to ensure that students reflect on their experiences so that their learning becomes explicit, thus adding direct value to their ventures.

Inviting students to develop their cases can also have a motivating effect on educators. When students produce creative cases, evaluation and grading are likely to be more enjoyable. At the same time, student-directed pedagogies involving learning processes that emerge directly from students' individual experiences may limit educators' control over the learning process as a whole. The present chapter contributes to this discussion and highlights the need for educators to be aware of the likely challenges when introducing student case development into the entrepreneurship classroom. While our students reflected on authentic entrepreneurial experiences from their start-ups, the teaching example described is flexible and can be implemented into any entrepreneurship classroom where different entrepreneurship experiences occur. In this sense, educators retain control to align the assignment with their individual contexts and learning objectives.

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