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The Case Method: "Managing Uncertainty" in the Business Communication Course

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In American business education, a common tool for engaging students is the case method. Pioneered by the Harvard Business School, case studies simulate real-life situations in which students must respond critically to complex issues. The case method has become a widespread pedagogy across business education with the exception of business communication, which has not yet fully explored this method. This article offers a brief history and description of case method pedagogy, a sample case in which students must respond to a challenging letter of complaint, and ideas for integrating this case into a business communication course.

Introduction

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching business communication can be motivating students to learn. Business communication is a required course for many business majors, a course that students may either dread or be indifferent to but one they rarely anticipate with eagerness. As every instructor knows, there is nothing more deafening than the silence in a class where students are apathetic and uninterested. For this reason, many instructors have spent their careers not just developing their knowledge of business communication but also experimenting with different means of engaging students in their courses.

In American business education, one of the oldest and most enduring tools for engaging students is the case method. Pioneered by the Harvard Business School (HBS) in the early twentieth century and used successfully at HBS to this day, the case method's strongest attraction is that it does not allow students to be passive. In fact, if presented with a well-designed case, students do not want to remain passive. Instead, they participate actively in resolving the case through critical thinking, reading, and writing as well as vigorous class debate, team work, and research.

Case studies simulate real-life situations in which students must respond critically to complex issues, and this method has become an important pedagogy across business education, from courses in management, marketing, and human resources to those in compliance and risk, organizational behavior, and business ethics. Interestingly, though, the field of business communication has not yet fully explored the case method and, thus, this pedagogy is rarely addressed in the discipline's journals or included in its textbooks and teaching materials. This article presents the case method as a valuable resource for teaching business communication, offering a brief history and description of the pedagogy, a sample case, and ideas for integrating

this case into a business communication course. This article does not propose the case method as an all-purpose solution to the challenges business communication instructors face, but as a pedagogical tool that may help students communicate more successfully in their business courses and careers.

The Case Method: Origins at the Harvard Business School

In business education, the case method is closely associated with the Harvard Business School. The School describes its signature pedagogy extensively in web pages dedicated to the case method as well as in digital downloads and print publications available through Harvard Business Publishing. According to the School's website, the HBS adopted the case method as its primary instructional tool in 1924 (HBS, 2014, *History*). Garvin (2003) explains that case instruction at Harvard initially took place in its Law School but was later adopted by the Business School. Both Garvin (2003) and Shugan (2006) identify Wallace P. Donham, second dean of HBS and a graduate of Harvard Law School, as the case method's first advocate at the Business School. Through persuasion and financial support, Donham fostered HBS's use of the case method to the point that, according to Garvin (2003), Donham's efforts led to cases being produced "in multiple fields and their use in virtually all courses by the end of the decade" (p. 56).

Today, HBS describes the case method it pioneered as a "profound educational innovation" that "places the student in the role of the decision-maker" in situations where there "are no simple solutions" and where decision-making is hampered by the "constraints and incomplete information found" in real life (HBS, 2014, *HBS Case Method*). Faced with these vague, even messy workplace situations, students cannot fall back on their traditional role as passive audience members waiting for their professors to impart knowledge. Instead, students must become responsible for their own learning and participate actively if they are to resolve the problems presented in the case.

On the HBS (2014) website, Harvard Professor Emeritus C. Roland Christensen describes this process, embodied in the case method, as the "art of managing uncertainty" (*Case Method in Practice*). Christensen's elegant description of case pedagogy is reflected in his School's explanation of how uncertainty is managed in a typical case-centered course. According to the HBS (2014) website, cases "introduce complex and often ambiguous real-world scenarios into the classroom, typically through a case study with a protagonist facing an important decision"; students in these courses "play a lead role in their own and each other's learning," with their instructors using "questions, dialogue, debate, and the application of analytical tools and frameworks to engage students in a challenging, interactive learning environment" (*Core Principles*). To resolve the case scenario, students work under their instructor's careful guidance and with one another to come to some sort of decision about the case. Students, moreover, must be prepared to argue for and support this decision to not only their instructor but their peers, who may have their own ideas about how to resolve the case.

As Ellet (2007) observes, the case method clearly "requires a lot from the student" (p. 6). Cases hone skills that range from critical thinking, research, and team work to verbal and written communication. Both during and after the case, students must present their arguments both verbally and in writing. Ellet (2007) explains that within the case classroom, the "role of each individual is to advance the discussion and contribute to the collective understanding of the case" (p. 7). In their writing, students may be required to reflect on their classroom experiences as well as the assumptions, reasoning, and research that lead to their decisions regarding the case. Students will also have to persuade their audiences in writing that their analysis of the case, including its "gaps and uncertainties," and their conclusions regarding the case are valid (Ellet, 2007, p. 6). As

Ellet (2007) suggests, it does not matter whether students must write an essay that diagnoses the case problem, argues for a decision regarding the case, or evaluates the case and its resolutions; all readers expect a solid "end product" that expresses the "writer's thinking . . . logically and economically" (p. 105).

The case method challenges students on many levels. To resolve a case, a student must engage with the case scenario verbally and in writing, critically and reflectively, individually and with teammates. However, students who meet the demands of case pedagogy are well rewarded. The HBS (2014) website promises that "through the dynamic process of exchanging perspectives, countering and defending points, and building on each other's ideas, students become adept at analyzing issues, exercising judgment, and making difficult decisions" (*HBS Case Method*). Ideally, students carry the skills acquired through classroom cases into their professional lives, where their decisions are no longer academic but have real consequences. The benefit of the case method is that students do not test their problem-solving skills in the real word but under the direction of an instructor-expert. This instructor guides, questions, prods, and pushes students so that they learn to reach and defend workplace decisions in the relative safety of the classroom.

To a large extent, the case method defines instruction at the Harvard Business School, which is known as much for this teaching tool as for the School's prestigious name. So identified is HBS with the case method that Harvard Business Publishing now offers hundreds of cases for sale as well as support materials such as handbooks, custom texts, tip sheets, videos, and teaching seminars that help instructors master case pedagogy. The case model has been wildly successful for HBS, which has arguably built an entire industry from the method. The HBS (2014) website states that "over 80 percent of cases sold throughout the world" are generated by the School, whose faculty "produce approximately 350 new cases per year" (*HBS Case Method*). Naturally, HBS has a vested interest in promoting the success of the case method. Nevertheless, the case remains one of the most enduring and successful business education pedagogies of the past one hundred years. The sections that follow describe this pedagogy in more detail, highlighting the ways that it has changed over time and has come to dominate business education not just at Harvard but at colleges and universities around the world.

An Evolving Pedagogy: Critiques and Extensions of the Harvard Case Method

The website for the Harvard Business School presents an idealized picture of the case method. In reality, however, case pedagogy has undergone critique and extension by both those who teach at HBS and instructors outside HBS who have adopted the School's signature method. For example, one of the more recent and timely critiques of the case method comes from Podolny (2009), a former HBS professor. In his *Harvard Business Review* article addressing the Great Recession, Podolny analyzes the cultural perception that the selfish risk-taking and lack of values and ethics of business school graduates led to the financial crisis of 2008. At one point, Podolny asks, "Does the case method, with its emphasis on context, help overcome these problems?" (p. 64). Podolny replies that although he "has written and taught cases for years," his "answer is no" (p. 64). Acknowledging that cases have great potential as a teaching tool, Podolny cautions that more often than not, they fail to teach students that consistent, ethical decision-making is crucial to success not only in business but society as well.

Podolny was certainly not the first HBS faculty member to question or extend the case method. In 1954, for example, McNair and Hersum's edited collection *The Case Method at the Harvard Business School* presented early critiques of the School's primary teaching method. As Cannon (1955) explains in a contemporary review of McNair and Hersum's collection, criticism

of case pedagogy came primarily from HBS's younger members, who presented a "somewhat more cautionary" take on the method than the School's senior faculty (p. 178). Decades later, Christensen & Hansen (1987) and Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen (1994) would extend the case method in comprehensive guides that combined discussions of evolving case pedagogy with then-current HBS cases. Since that time, faculty attached to HBS have continued to refine their most well-known teaching tool. Thus, Christensen & Carlile (2009) argue for the value of cases in developing and teaching management theory, their focus on theory extending the case method to intellectual areas often mistakenly viewed as disconnected from classroom instruction.

Case pedagogy, moreover, has not remained confined to its original home but has become a staple of business education across the globe. Outside of Harvard, instructors and researchers have explored this method in detail, offering new perspectives on the century-old teaching tool. Barnes et al. (1994) state that case pedagogy has extended to institutions as diverse as Roanoke College, the University of Richmond, the University of Denver, Gottenburg University, and Idaho State University (p. xii). Farther afield, researchers have examined case pedagogy in the U.K. (Jennings, 1996), Hong Kong (Chang, Lee, Ng, & Jennings, 2001), Taiwan (Shieh, Lyu, & Cheng, 2012), and China (Hong, 2009; Xiang-jie, 2012). Still other researchers have investigated the migration of case pedagogy to online environments (Rollag, 2010; Webb, Gill, & Poe, 2005) while their colleagues (Brennan & Ahmad, 2005) have explored case pedagogy from the perspective of the business student rather than the business professor.

Finally, the case method has been adopted by fields other than business. In 1985, Harvard Medical School added the case method to its curriculum (Garvin, 2003). Further, Barnes et al. (1994) explain that Harvard's School of Public Health and School of Education have adopted case pedagogy. A survey of recent case pedagogy literature reveals that the case method is used in fields that range from civil engineering (Newson & Delatte, 2011), software engineering (Razali, Zainal, & Chitsaz, 2012), and ethics (Mumford et al., 2012) to medicine and pharmacy (Bowe, Voss, & Aretz, 2009; Nicholl & Lou, 2012; Rege et al., 2012), nursing (Iqbal & Rubab, 2012), and international studies (Perni, 2006). Clearly, the case method has grown far beyond HBS, to the point that it dominates American and, increasingly, global business education and has also reached into fields outside of business. Interestingly, though, one field in which case pedagogy has not fully established itself is business communication. The next section examines the case method's absence from this core area of business education.

The Case Method in Business Communication Pedagogy

Business communication instructors have numerous resources to support their teaching, including journals, textbooks, online or digital instructional materials, professional associations, degrees, and professional development opportunities. Interestingly, despite the case study's presence across business education, the case method is not a widely discussed pedagogy in business communication. Very few, if any, business communication textbooks place the case at their pedagogical center, although a notable exception is O'Rourke's (2008) *Business Communication Casebook*. In addition, there is no online clearinghouse for business communication cases similar to the massive database of cases maintained by HBS. Again, an exception is the Association for Business Communication's [ABC] (2013) annual Student Writing Contest, in which undergraduates respond to a case scenario developed each year by a different business communication instructor. Posted to the ABC site are both the winning student entries for the past decade as well as the cases to which these students responded.

Beyond the ABC's cases, though, the case method's lack of a strong presence in business

communication is striking since the case's strongest asset is that it fosters the critical thinking, reading, and writing skills that communication instructors seek to develop in their students. One reason that the case method may not be widely discussed in business communication is that the pedagogy does not always fall under the name "case method." At HBS, for example, the case method is also called the "case study" and is also closely linked to "participant-centered learning," a term that highlights the pedagogy's dynamic nature. Moreover, the School's first Dean, Edwin Gay, initially called this pedagogy the "problem method" (HBS, 2014, *Case Method at HBS*). Within business communication, instructors employ a number of pedagogies similar to the case method, and these pedagogies are discussed regularly in journals such as *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*.

For example, discussing critical thinking in the finance curriculum, Carrithers, Ling, & Bean (2008) refer to the "business case" (p. 154) in passing but prefer the term "ill-structured or messy problem" (p. 153) to describe a teaching tool that sounds much like the HBS case method. As Carrithers et al. explain, "an ill-structured problem requires thinkers to propose a best solution and justify it with reasons and evidence" (p. 153), and "its open-ended context with many variables and possibly irrelevant details requires the student to make a decision in the face of uncertainty" (p. 154). Substitute "case method" for "ill-structured problem," and the result is the same. With the instructor as expert guide, students must engage in the "art of managing uncertainty" (HBS, 2014, *Case Method in Practice*) to find a reasonable solution to a stubbornly messy problem. While Carrithers et al. (2008) favor "ill-structured or messy problem" over the term "case," Conn (2008) does highlight the case study in her article exploring the rhetorical and ethical dimensions of resume writing. However, like her fellow researchers, Conn often relies on words other than "case," using the more descriptive "dilemma" throughout most of her article to describe an ethically grounded resume assignment.

Another reason that the case method does not appear often in published business communication pedagogy may be that instructors have found teaching tools that bear similarity to the case method but that work better for their courses. Thus, as Paulson (2011) presents a merger and acquisition exercise for a business management class of adult learners, he stresses critical thinking, problem solving, and reality-based projects as much as the case method. However, he clearly bases his classroom exercise in experiential learning rather than case pedagogy. Similarly, Smart, Witt, and Scott's (2012) attempts to create learner-centered business communication courses are grounded in constructivist and inductive approaches to learning, yet their learning models also echo case pedagogy. For this reason, when Smart et al. (2012) describe the benefits of inductive and constructivist approaches, they could be describing the effect that cases have on a course. As they explain, the "shift in focus to active and reflective learning helps students create a learning community where both students and the instructor are empowered to question and to make meaning, and all are invigorated in this phenomenon we call learning" (p. 402).

Smart et al. (2012), Paulson (2011), Conn (2008), & Carrithers et al. (2008) demonstrate business communication's continuing interest in pedagogies that support critical thinking, inquiry, and reflection. Moreover, their research shows that business communication may have no overarching need for HBS's case method. The field generates its own body of knowledge, and researchers and instructors can ground their communication courses in any pedagogies they deem best suited to their students' needs. This article aims not to convince business communication specialists that they must use the case method's strategies or terminology. Instead, this article asks communication specialists to consider the HBS method as a possible teaching tool for their courses. Given the case study's prevalence across business education, our field might benefit from

linking its critical pedagogies to a method with which students and their other business instructors are likely already familiar. Coherence across the curriculum is desirable, and the case method may offer a way to tie business communication courses more closely to the larger business curriculum. In this spirit, the remaining sections of this article present a short case that business communication instructors can use to assess whether the case method would be suitable for their courses.

Bringing the Case Method into the Business Communication Course: A Sample Case

To assist instructors in determining whether cases might be useful in their own courses, this article presents a case (see Appendix: Sample Case) based on the HBS model. This case has not been taken from the HBS collection, nor does it draw from any existing HBS cases. In other words, the sample case seeks to follow the spirit rather than the letter of the HBS method. In keeping with this goal, the sample case follows the pedagogical outline or structure laid out by Ellet (2007) in Harvard Business Press's *Case Study Handbook*. A member of the HBS faculty who specializes in case pedagogy, Ellet emphasizes key features of his approach to cases, beginning with doing "everything" he can "to discourage the notion of a 'right answer' to a case" (p. 3). For Ellet, cases demand that "both the instructor and student must be active" (p. 11) if they are to reach not correct answers but plausible answers to the dilemmas presented in the scenarios.

At their core, cases are critical exercises and, as Ellet (2007) observes, they are often "perplexing" (p. 5), the epitome of the "text that refuses to explain itself" (p. 19). Drawn into the ambiguous narratives brought up by cases, students must read the case materials carefully, think critically about the details of the case, research issues related to the case, acknowledge multiple points of view and counterarguments, take a stand on the issues, collect valid evidence to support their stand, articulate and defend this stance to their peers and instructor, and, ultimately, commit their critical thinking, reading, and research to writing.

In his *Case Study Handbook*, Ellet (2007) divides this process into three stages: analysis, discussion, and writing. He does not present this process as rigid and points to the "links" between the three phases (p. 2). Ellet also describes the process as "flexible and adaptable" as he encourages students to "experiment with it" and discover their "own process" or approach to case studies (p. 28). Moreover, Ellet does not present his three-stage method as "indispensable" or as the only way to manage a case (pp. 2-3). Nevertheless, for business communication instructors interested in cases as a possible instructional tool, Ellet's three stages provide a means through which to explore and teach the case method. For this reason, the sample case in this article follows the phases of analysis, discussion, and writing outlined by Ellet.

Additionally, in his template for cases, Ellet (2007) notes that cases "can range from one page to fifty or more" (p. 13). For the sake of brevity, the sample case presented here is short—three pages in length. Despite its brief length, the sample case fulfills Ellet's requirement that cases convey the "unease of ambiguity and multiple meanings" (p. 12). Still, as C. R. Christensen observes, there is an "art of managing" this "uncertainty" (*Case Method in Practice*), and the sample case may help business communication instructors and students begin to master this art.

In the sample (see Appendix: Sample Case), students are asked to tackle thorny workplace communication problems in a small business called Colonial Health Sciences Online (CHSO), a for-profit company that provides online education. The case scenario requires that students communicate with customers of CHSO, negotiate (verbally, electronically, and in writing) the power structures of this workplace, and track down critical information needed to resolve the problems in the scenario. To complicate matters, students face issues that may force them, in their role as the case's main character, to make difficult ethical decisions that must be committed to

writing.

This main character is a recent hire of CHSO and serves as the company's Assistant Director of Online Programs. The company/school offers online courses to health care professionals required by their states and professional associations to complete mandatory, regular continuing education to retain their state licenses and professional credentials. Not all customers/students are pleased with CHSO, its courses, or its services. In the scenario, one such customer is Alicia Nelson, a medical transcriptionist "disenrolled" from an online course for supposedly failing to complete the course by the deadline indicated in her course contract. Ms. Nelson has written a letter of complaint to the company's Executive Director, Arthur Evans. In her letter, Nelson claims that she was wrongly dropped from her online course, in part because she was not granted accommodations due to her under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

After receiving Nelson's letter, Mr. Evans turns the document over to Mary Wallace, the Director of Online Programs and the immediate supervisor of the case's main character. Mary Wallace then asks this character, the Assistant Director, to draft a letter that responds to Alicia Nelson. The letter will be in Mary Wallace's name, and Wallace will sign it. Wallace also informs her employee that Mr. Evans has told her he wants "nothing more to do with this student" and that the company "will give her nothing." Finally, Mary informs her Assistant Director that the letter will be reviewed by the company's lawyer but that the lawyer wants a full draft of the letter (not a rough or incomplete draft) to review.

This mass of directives, complications, regulations, and possible ethical dilemmas is the situation in which business communication students find themselves. Tackling this case as the main character or Assistant Director, the students' first step will be, according to Ellet's (2007) model, to analyze the scenario. The section that follows demonstrates ways that students, with their instructor's guidance, might approach this initial phase of the case.

Phase One: Analysis

By their nature, cases like the sample presented in this article mimic real life with all its ambiguity. As such, when students first encounter Alicia Nelson and her complaint to Colonial Health Sciences Online, they may experience a range of emotions: confusion at an assignment that does not immediately reveal its solution, frustration at an instructor who will not or cannot give them the "correct" answer, and slight panic at having to figure out how best to respond to Alicia's complaint. On the other hand, students facing this communication dilemma may experience excitement instead of anxiety. They discover that business communication is not a series of dry chapters in a textbook or theories in a lecture or cookie-cutter templates that can be easily filled in. Workplace communication requires careful, critical thought, and the first step to resolving the cases that echo reality is often analysis.

Adding to the challenge of the Alicia Nelson case is that analysis has no set methodology; that is, there is no *one* way to analyze a case. Nevertheless, for the sample case, parameters for analysis are suggested by the HBS, which explains that the case method "places the student in the role of the decision-maker" in situations where decision-making is hampered by the "constraints and incomplete information found" in real life (HBS, 2014, *HBS Case Method*). Naturally, students begin their analysis by reading the case scenario. Simple enough, but students must be "active readers" if they are to make the decisions that the case requires (Ellet, 2007, p. 14). In other words, the art of managing uncertainty is an active one.

Since most cases, the Alicia Nelson case included, are hampered by incomplete information, students can start their analysis by cataloguing the information that they do and do

not have about Alicia's situation. This process involves separating out the information that the case does offer from the "noise" of irrelevant details and "dead ends" and the "unstated information that must be inferred" from the information that is provided (Ellet, 2007, p. 13). Thus, working through Alicia's case individually, in small groups, or as a class, students could list the three types of information the case offers: stated, unstated, and "noise" or irrelevant information. Students might list under "stated information" facts such as Alicia's enrollment in CHSO's online courses, her subsequent disenrollment, and her recent act of writing a letter to the company's Executive Director. Also stated are the names and titles of various characters in the story, including Alicia Nelson, Mary Wallace (Director of Online Programs), Arthur Evans (Executive Director), David Parker (legal counsel), and the Assistant Director of Online Programs, the central character in the story and the person tasked with responding to Alicia in writing. An additional detail students might list is the company's transition to a new Content Management System during the year in which Alicia was disenrolled.

Beyond these facts, the case is murkier. Thus, items that students might list for "unstated information" include the actual cause of Alicia's disenrollment. Was she disenrolled for missing an exam, or did a lack of ADA accommodations play a role in her removal from the course? What role did the company's computer system crash play in Alicia's disenrollment from her course? Does documentation of Alicia Nelson's ADA claim exist? Where is a copy of Alicia's enrollment contract? What does that contract state about exam deadlines, ADA accommodations, system crashes, and other factors related to Alicia's case? Other unstated but critically important information includes the attitude of Executive Director Arthur Evans and Director of Online Programs Mary Wallace toward Alicia. Why are they so opposed to Alicia returning to CHSO? Moreover, what would their reaction be if the case's main character, the Assistant Director of Online Programs, discovers information that would place the company in the wrong in its treatment of Alicia or require her re-enrollment for ethical, if not legal, reasons?

Addressing unstated information, Ellet (2007) stresses inference, the "primary skill" of the case method and the one through which students "furnish missing information" (p. 14). Students can infer certain aspects of Alicia Nelson's case, for example, the implications of Mary Wallace and Arthur Evans's active resistance and even outright hostility to Alicia's return to school. The cause of their resistance is not necessarily relevant to the task that the Assistant Director, the case's main character, has been given to complete. What matters is that Wallace and Evans are in positions superior to the newly hired Assistant Director, do not want Alicia back and, thus, are unlikely to be receptive to any arguments the Assistant Director might make in Alicia's favor. This resistance narrows the range of options that students, acting as the Assistant Director, have in responding to the case.

The supervisors' resistance is not the only information that can be inferred from the case. Nevertheless, early in this assignment, students realize that not much about Alicia's situation is stated or can be inferred. This short case purposefully gives students very little material to work with, replicating the chaos that can exist both for a new hire and also during a company's transition to a new state, ownership, and management. At this point, as they grapple with their list of "unstated information," students may try to fill gaps in the case. For example, students may notice that the case scenario does provide one detail that validates Alicia's complaints. According to the scenario, the Assistant Director learns that the company's online system was, indeed, down during the one-week extension Alicia received for her exam. (Whether or not Alicia tried to log on during the system crash is a fact that may never be known.)

Additional internal research may uncover other "unstated" details such as the wording of

Alicia's course contract and the location of her ADA paperwork as well as further electronic and print correspondence between her and the company. Again, the sample case in this article does not provide this information. Nevertheless, business communication instructors can decide whether they want to add these details (contract, ADA paperwork) to the case scenario or revise the scenario so that these materials can be discovered or their existence and wording inferred. On the other hand, instructors have the option of using the case as is and, thus, leaving critical details unknown and even unknowable. This approach often frustrates students tackling the case but mimics real-world situations in which certain information may never be known and decisions must be made nonetheless.

Finally, students must separate out the "noise" in this case from information actually relevant to the case. The most distracting noise in the Alicia Nelson scenario may be the ADA issue. In her letter of complaint, Alicia comments at great length on her ADA accommodations for test anxiety. At first, students may regard ADA as another area left mostly "unstated" in the case and, thus, an area on which they should perform research, in this instance, research on ADA laws and regulations. No doubt, this research will enhance students' knowledge of important ADA issues in the workplace. However, this research may be only marginally useful to resolving the Alicia Nelson case. The reason stems from the circumstances surrounding Alicia's missed exam and subsequent disenrollment.

Students who read the case scenario carefully will discover that, in fact, Alicia did receive for her first three exams the "time and a half" mandated for documented test anxiety. Students can safely infer that Alicia would have received time and a half on her fourth and final exam *if* she had taken that exam. Instead, before the fourth exam, Alicia requested and received a one-week extension not for ADA but for "work-related reasons." Unfortunately, there is no record of Alicia attempting the fourth exam or contacting the company to report a computer system failure until well after the extended deadline. By that time, Alicia had been disenrolled.

Analyzing Alicia's situation, students can justifiably argue that Alicia may have grounds for re-enrollment based on the company's system crash, failure to adequately inform students of the crash, or other factors. However, it is a stretch for Alicia to argue that Colonial Health Sciences Online is in the wrong due to non-compliance with ADA. As important a topic as ADA is, ADA in this case is the noise that Ellet (2007) cautions students to avoid. Nevertheless, the ADA issue in this case highlights why C. Roland Christensen described case pedagogy as an "art" (*Case Method in Practice*) and not a procedure with easily definable steps that can be checked off one by one. Analysis is akin to rhetorical invention, which generates far more information and possibilities for response than any speaker or writer could ever use. The key to resolving a case successfully is for students to winnow down these possibilities to the most feasible, and one means for arriving at feasible responses is discussion, another hallmark of the case method.

Phase Two: Discussion

On its website, the HBS (2014) offers an excellent overview of discussion's role in the case method: "through the dynamic process of exchanging perspectives, countering and defending points, and building on each other's ideas, students become adept at analyzing issues, exercising judgment, and making difficult decisions" (*HBS Case Method*). In this quotation, analysis is mentioned in the context of discussion, emphasizing that the stages of case pedagogy (analysis, discussion, writing) are not discrete but overlapping and recursive. However, what separates the distinct phase known as analysis from the analysis that takes place within the discussion phase is the collaborative nature of the latter. From its start a century ago, the Harvard case method has

been a group exercise. At any stage of a case, students can perform analysis on their own; however, the case method does not permit them to remain in isolation. Students must return to their peers and instructor to debate the ideas generated during analysis.

Thus, in the Alicia Nelson case, discussion is the time when students can share their lists of stated and unstated information and noise, to determine where their lists do and do not coincide. Talking with their peers, students will see that details they thought were perfectly clear or "stated" can be called into question. For example, students quickly notice that the only document the sample case supplies beyond the case scenario is the complaint letter that Alicia Nelson has written to Executive Director Evans. Within this case, the letter is one of the few pieces of stated information that the scenario offers. However, students can debate the nature of the letter and its effect on Alicia's credibility and, thus, the company's response. Alicia's letter is not a model complaint letter. She misspells Evans's name and then writes a rambling and unfocused complaint that seeks to create an "us versus them" identification that allies Evans and herself against his own staff.

Alicia also tries the tactic of throwing any and all possible complaints at the school: her treatment as an ADA student, the company's computer problems, its lack of appropriate concern for working students. Alicia's complaints may be justified. However, her letter gives off an air of desperation, as though she is trying to find any complaint that will stick. Combined with the other problems in her letter, this strategy harms her ethos as a writer and opens up one of the few artifacts of the case to interpretation. Debating Alicia's credibility, students who must respond to her complaint in writing realize that one of the case's few tangible items, Alicia's letter, now requires that they, in Ellet's (2007) words, "furnish missing information" through inference (p. 14).

Information that the letter does not supply but which students could now debate includes the validity of Alicia's complaints. Which of her several complaints are valid and which are not? Fair or not, Alicia's careless misspelling of Evans's name and rambling prose bring her own attention to detail into question. Just how careful of a student is she, and was she (not the school) primarily to blame for the missed exam? Finally, human nature being what it is, how can students put aside their potentially defensive response to Alicia's hostility so that they can write a dispassionate and fair response to her letter? Clouding Alicia's case, these issues require that students infer information not directly stated in her letter, and, inevitably, this information affects their written replies to Alicia.

Moreover, discussing the case, students who identified certain details as noise often learn that their classmates have not dismissed this information so easily. The best example of this is once again the ADA issue, which typically sparks the most debate among students. In this regard, Alicia's rhetorical strategy of pressing her ADA concerns pays off. In discussion, students often express willingness to sidestep the ADA issue entirely, as irrelevant to Alicia's failure to take her exam by its extended deadline. Technically, they are correct in that Alicia's one-week extension was awarded for work reasons and not as an ADA accommodation.

However, a significant number of students always counter that even if the company is not technically or even legally in the wrong on ADA, the company should address ADA in its response, either as a courtesy to Alicia or as an ethical concern and to affirm the company's commitment to ADA. In response, students opposed to mentioning ADA state that it could be problematic to bring up ADA at all, given the issue's legal ramifications, and prefer to remain silent on an issue that, in their estimation, is merely troublesome noise that Alicia attempts to insert into the case.

Students rarely reach consensus on the ADA issue or, for that matter, many issues in the Alicia Nelson case. Nor is consensus the goal of case discussion. Like analysis, discussion is akin to rhetorical invention, designed to generate more possibilities for discourse than students can

possibly use. As Ellet (2007) observes, a point generated through analysis or discussion is not "wrong" unless a student "can't make a credible argument for it from case evidence" (p. 34). In discussion, students should expect their classmates to challenge their points and should be prepared to defend their ideas using the evidence that the case does offer, whether this evidence is based in fact or inference.

Throughout this process, the instructor's role is not to impart knowledge through lecture but to serve as an expert guide who assists students in finding their way through the case's dilemmas, wrong turns, and noise. As the HBS (2014) website indicates, before the case begins, the instructor must carefully plan each stage (analysis, discussion, and writing) and yet remain flexible enough to understand that these stages will shift and overlap once the case is introduced into the classroom (*Leading*). Cases are dynamic, and according to HBS (2014, *Leading*) and Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen (1994), discussion in particular requires that instructors question, listen, respond, manage transitions, and help students reach closure without demanding consensus. At the same time, instructors must manage the timing of discussions, engage students and encourage participation, and even decide how to use physical or online equipment in the traditional or virtual classroom. Nevertheless, as dynamic as case-based classes can be, business communication courses eventually require a communication product of some kind. The Alicia Nelson case calls for a written product, a letter responding to Alicia's complaint. At some point, with their instructor's guidance, students must commit their decisions about Alicia's case to writing.

Phase Three: Writing

Of the three phases of case pedagogy that Ellet (2007) describes, writing receives the least attention among his HBS peers in their studies of the case method. Discussion receives the majority of attention on HBS web pages covering case pedagogy and in print works by Barnes et al. (1994) and Christensen and Carlile (2009). Even among those who strongly criticize the case method (Shugan, 2006), discussion receives the bulk of attention or, at times, scorn. So critical is discussion to the case experience that HBS (2014) notes, "50 percent of a student's grade in many courses is based on the quality of class participation" (*HBS Case Method*). No doubt, business communication instructors would agree that discussion is important to any communication course. However, these instructors also value their students' ability to communicate through writing. In a business communication course that incorporates cases like the Alicia Nelson case, writing assignments might take two forms: (1) business documents that respond directly to the case scenario, and (2) papers that reflect on, analyze, or argue a position related to the case.

When students write a business document responding to Alicia Nelson's complaint, their actions reflect years of business communication pedagogy focused on the genres of workplace writing. Many business communication courses and textbooks aim to help students master genres that range from the business letter, memo, and professional email to the oral presentation, proposal, and business plan. Moreover, when the field of business communication crosses paths with the case method, as it does in ABC's (2013) annual case contest and in certain pedagogy articles (Carrithers et al., 2008; Conn, 2008; Paulson, 2011; Smart et al., 2012), students often must compose documents or work with genres common in the workplace.

Thus, students tackling the Alicia Nelson case may decide to write the letter replying to Alicia's complaint that Mary Wallace, their Director in the scenario, has instructed them to write. Depending on students' analysis of the case and ensuing discussions, their letters may be short and simply tell Alicia that her request to re-take her exam has been denied. Or, their letters may be

longer, mentioning reasons why the request has been rejected or addressing the problematic issue of Alicia's ADA accommodations. No two letters will be alike, nor should they be in a case assignment. In fact, depending on their decisions about the case, some students may write a letter of resignation to Mary Wallace while others may write an entirely different document, perhaps an email to Wallace requesting a review of Alicia's situation. There will even be students who write no document at all, deciding that Alicia's case calls for an absolute lack of documentation.

Regardless of how students respond to the case, they should be able to make a "credible argument" for their decision (Ellet, 2007, p. 34). At this point, students can move away from the genres of the workplace and write traditional academic papers that argue for their decision or, if the instructor prefers, reflect on or analyze their decision or argue some issue related to the case. Again, case pedagogy allows for flexibility, not mandating the type of documents students write or the decisions that they make but merely that they *write* and examine their choices critically and in depth. Naturally, instructors can leave out this latter stage of argumentative, reflective, or analytical writing. However, students can benefit greatly if given the time both to respond to a case through the genres of the workplace and to explore, through writing, the reasons driving their responses.

In the future, when they must react to similar situations in an actual workplace, students may not have the luxury to think or write or confer with their co-workers critically. The case-based classroom offers that space where students can practice responding to thorny workplace dilemmas and then justify their decisions not only verbally to their instructors and peers but through the exacting medium of writing. Unlike other forms of communication, writing forces us to consider more slowly and, thus, more carefully why we make the choices that we do. For that reason, writing, including the reflective, analytical, or argument-driven writing that follows genre-based business writing, has a place in the case-based business communication course.

Conclusion

This article's goal has not been to present the HBS case method as more valuable than other business communication pedagogies. Instead, this article has sought to offer HBS's oldest pedagogy as one more teaching tool available to business communication instructors. As the article's sample case has demonstrated, cases can help students learn more about the workplace genres around which many business communication courses are structured. However, cases offer other benefits to students. For example, Robles (2012) highlights the top 10 "soft skills" that business executives identify as critical to employees' success. Among these skills are interpersonal or "people" skills such as courtesy, work ethic, integrity, flexibility, and competence in communication and teamwork.

Distinguishing these soft skills from the "hard skills" of technical and specialized knowledge, Robles admits that soft skills are difficult to measure and to teach. Nevertheless, he cites an earlier study by Boyce, Williams, Kelly, and Yee (2001) that advocates case studies as a means to teach these critical but nebulous soft skills. Interestingly, Boyce et al.'s (2001) study appeared in a journal of accounting, one of the hard skills distinguished from the soft skills of which communication is a key example. It may be that the field of business communication can help students to develop this most crucial of soft skills by using a pedagogy imported from the most famous of business schools and advocated by "hard skills" disciplines across the business spectrum. If nothing else, business communication instructors may want to test the HBS case method to determine if this century-old pedagogy can benefit their students.

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APPENDIX: SAMPLE CASE

RESPONDING TO A COMPLAINT LETTER

THE SCENARIO

Three months ago, you began working as **Assistant Director of Online Programs** for a small, for-profit education company called **Colonial Health Sciences Online**. Colonial employs 40 people and offers online continuing education courses to health care professionals (nurses, medical assistants, x-ray techs, pharmacy techs, medical transcriptionists, etc.). Many health care professionals are required by their states and professional associations to complete mandatory continuing education at regular intervals to retain the state licenses and professional credentials needed to continue practicing. To offer continuing education to health care professionals, a company must be accredited by an organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Colonial is accredited by the National Continuing Education Council (NCEC), which is recognized by the Department of Education. The NCEC requires that Colonial meet certain educational standards, including maintaining high academic standards mandated by NCEC and providing customers/students with contracts outlining their obligations and the company's obligations.

Colonial has been in existence for 10 years and faces great competition from other online education providers. However, the company is moderately successful, with a stable customer base and an aggressive marketing plan to acquire new customers. Some of the company's customers pay for their courses out of their own pocket. Others work for large health care companies that pay for the courses for their employees. Other customers receive federal funding (vocational rehabilitation, loans, etc.) to pay for their courses. All courses are led by online instructors with the appropriate health care degrees and credentials. For each course, customers sign a contract that lists the cost of their course and the requirements for completing the course, including the deadline by which the course must be completed.

At Colonial, you report to **Mary Wallace**, **Director of Online Programs**, who is responsible for course planning and development as well as managing the company's day-to-day operations. Wallace reports to the company's **Executive Director**, **Arthur Evans**, who reports to the owners of Colonial. The company's owners own a number of other educational companies, many of them larger, more successful, and more profitable than Colonial.

YOUR TASK

One morning, Mary Wallace calls you into her office. She tells you that, last week, Mr. Evans received a letter of complaint from **Alicia Nelson**, a medical transcriptionist who was disenrolled from an online course last year (2013) for failing to complete the course by the deadline indicated in her course contract. (You will find Alicia Nelson's letter on the last page of this document). Nelson claims that she was wrongly disenrolled from the online course, in part because she was not given accommodations due to her under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In her letter, Nelson writes that she requested these accommodations, which she states were initially granted but which, Alicia suggests, were then not honored at the end of the course. Alicia states that, ultimately, she was disenrolled and received no credit for the course.

Mary Wallace asks you to draft a letter that responds to Alicia Nelson. **The letter will be in Mary Wallace's name, and Mary Wallace will sign it**. She also informs you that she and Arthur Evans have talked about the situation and that Mr. Evans told her he wants "nothing more to do with this student" and that the company "will give her nothing." Mary also informs you that your letter will be reviewed by the company's lawyer, **David Parker**, but that the lawyer wants you to draft a full letter, which he will then review.

WHAT YOU DO FIRST

After leaving Mary's office, you first decide to review Alicia Nelson's file, which is kept in a secure, internal Content Management System. You review Alicia's file knowing that your company underwent a substantial change from one Content Management System to another Content Management System during the year (2013) that Alicia was disenrolled.

You read Alicia Nelson's recent letter of complaint to the company. You also review older emails she exchanged with counselors who advise customers as they complete their courses. You notice that Alicia did request that she be allowed to have more time for online tests due to "severe test anxiety." In an email, Alicia's counselor told her that the company could grant this request if Alicia sent documentation to confirm the anxiety. The emails indicate that Alicia sent paperwork to document her ADA request, but you discover that no one knows where the documentation is. Alicia was given more time for three of the course's four online exams. However, on July 1, 2013, Alicia requested an extension for her fourth exam for work reasons. Her counselor gave her a one-week extension, until July 8, 2013. Alicia did not take the course's fourth exam before the new deadline and was, in keeping with company policy for all customers, immediately disenrolled.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- What other information do you need before you can draft your letter?
- Who else should you talk to?
- What research do you need to do?
- Do you know the U.S. government's ADA laws and regulations? Where can you find these?
- Your boss and the Executive Director of the company have said to give this customer "nothing." What will you do, especially IF you discover that the company is obligated by ADA to make accommodations?

February 21, 2015

Arthur Evans, Executive Director
Colonial Health Sciences
555 State Boulevard
City, ST 01234

Dear Mr. Evan:

I hope you can help me. In 2013, I enrolled in a class offered by your school, Medical Transcription and the Changing Health Care System. I currently work as a transcriptionist in Windsor County, Michigan and I must complete continuing education course every year to continue my employment with Windsor County Hospital System. Although I enjoyed the course and looked forward to completing it, I was wrongfully disenrolled by your staff and have now been told that I can receive no credit for the course and, if I want the credit, must take and pay for the course again.

Please let me tell you more about what happened and I hope you will agree that I was wrongfully disenrolled and be able to resolve this matter. After I enrolled in the course, I contacted the course counselor and told her that I have severe test anxiety that makes it necessary to have more time to complete tests. As an ADA student, I asked for more time to complete the online tests for the medical transcripting course. My counselor explained that I needed to send in a signed letter from my doctor stating that I have severe anxiety and that I should receive more time for tests. I sent in this letter and was given more time for three of my online tests. I passed these tests. However, I did not receive enough time for my fourth and final test. You see, I knew I would not be able to log on to the course until after the course deadline due to work reasons. So, I asked for more time to complete the course. My counselor gave me a one week extension. A few days later, when I went to log on to the course to complete the fourth exam and finish the course, I could not log on. The system was down. I waited a day or two and then tried again. This time, a message came up on my screen that said my course had expired and I should contact a counselor if I wanted more information. I contacted my counselor and she told me that the reason I was disenrolled was because I did not take the fourth test by the new course deadline of one week later. She also told me that if I wanted to complete the course, I would have to enroll again, take all the tests again, and pay the full tuition.

I do not believe that these are fair requirements. As you know, your customers are busy people with busy work and personal lives. Your brochures and catalogs say that you will help us to complete our courses even with a busy schedule! As you know, Colonial has lots of competition from other companies where we can take online continuing education but I chose Colonial because your materials promise to work around our schedules. Now, I ask you, is it fair to market to us this way and then to impose deadlines on us once we enroll? I would like your school to honor its original agreement with me and to fulfill my original request and give me more time for my fourth test so I can finish the course and receive the credit that I paid and studied for.

Sincerely,

Alicia Nelson