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## TEACHING CASES IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP: GIVING LIFE AND MEANING TO LEARNING

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As Adjunct Editor for cases and technological reports, it is with great satisfaction that I have witnessed, in recent years, the considerable improvement in the quality of teaching cases submitted to REGEPE. Both the proportion of rejected cases and the number of recommendations for adjustments to the approved cases decreased considerably.

A teaching case can be defined as a broad spectrum of instructional methods, which revolve around reading and discussing a document about a business scenario, known as a “case”. In this sense, teaching cases are true stories, based on research and detailed studies, which provide real data to feed classroom discussions (Theroux & Clark, 2004).

The use of business cases based on real situations for educational purposes began in 1920, when the Harvard Business School adopted the model created by the Harvard Law School, with simulations of legal cases and hypothetical questions that lead the students to discuss possible decisions. Since then, the Harvard Case Method has become worldwide known and adopted (Garvin, 2003).

In the Harvard Case Method, cases present situations inspired by real stories, with a problem or dilemma, and the respective information, so that students can analyze possible alternatives and then make decisions in groups to solve it, applying previously learned content (Liesz & Pettit-O'Malley, 2016). Decisions taken are

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transformed into themes, discussed in the classroom, under the mediation of the instructor or facilitator (Nagel, 1991).

Few areas in Administration benefit from teaching cases as much as Entrepreneurship. The dynamic and often erratic nature of entrepreneurial activities is so diverse and lacking structure, that few theoretical conceptions underlie entrepreneurial practice. The possibility of discussing real cases of entrepreneurs, in addition to bringing the business routine close to the students, helps them to make meaningful connections with their own reality, increasing their attention and engagement, which leads, consequently, to a greater retention of content of the contents being taught and discussed (Garvin, 2007).

According to Greenhalgh (2007), teaching cases help students to identify and solve problems. Students use data and information to operate logical and rigorous analysis, aiming to explore the complexity of the situations experienced. In this way, the students experience the entrepreneur's reality, making decisions under the same circumstances (Liang & Wang, 2004). This opportunity represents the great value of the teaching case in Entrepreneurial Education: the possibility for the student to be the protagonist of the story, imagining what the entrepreneur would have done, taking the opportunity to evaluate the conditions and explore the proposed alternatives, as if it were a research laboratory.

One of the great criticisms of students of Entrepreneurship courses is the lack of practice, which is why many drop out of school, in favor of "hands on" practice, that is, of putting their business idea to work. Although the possibility of setting up a real business, however small, is a privilege that very few institutions can offer their Entrepreneurship major students, most of the real dilemmas faced happen when the business is already established. In this sense, the simulation proposed by a teaching case brings some of this experience to the student. Students can discuss the situation, the dilemma, the circumstances and develop possible solutions together with other students and with the instructor, substantially expanding the legitimate and meaningful learning opportunity.

Analyzing a problem from the perspective of a real entrepreneur is what Bridgman, Cummings and Mclaughlin (2016) suggest as a deepening of the relationship between history and legitimacy. From the systematic analysis of the narrative of a story that has already happened, the students can retrieve the contents studied in the classroom and apply the concept of invented tradition, that is, a set of



practices, usually governed by tacitly accepted rules, and a ritual of symbolic nature. This allows authors to develop new meaning to the alternative forms of action, as if the actor could go back to the past and live the experience again, with better preparation and background for decision-making.

A caution, which few consider in the development of teaching cases, is the degree of fidelity to the real facts. In this sense, it is important to note that teaching cases have the strict purpose of serving as a support tool for the educator to illustrate one or several points, in the learning objectives of a class or a course, unlike the case studies, which they usually reflect their authors' research ambitions or interests (Lapoule & Lynch, 2018) and, therefore, the teaching cases do not need to be totally faithful to reality.

When preparing a teaching case, the authors have some freedom to adjust the narrative, in order to make it richer for debates and discussions between students and instructors; and they can create hypothetical situations to enrich the pedagogical power of the case. With that, it no longer makes sense to observe the solution adopted by the entrepreneur to solve the proposed dilemma, since the truth is not important, but the students' ability to reflect in the presence of new situations. Thus, teaching cases do not have right or wrong answers, since the answer adopted by the entrepreneur is not necessarily the correct one, and students can present several correct answers, as long as they are properly grounded and grounded, as this is precisely the purpose of discussing cases (Garvin, 2007).

It is worth remembering that the Harvard case method is only one of the types of teaching cases - and, perhaps, the best known and adopted worldwide -, whose main characteristic is that it is developed to culminate in decision-making. This is the type of case in which REGEPE has a preference, although other varieties can be equally accepted, if they clearly demonstrate the pedagogical objectives. The cases we receive most often are descriptive (Liang & Wang, 2004), in which the author simply narrates or recounts past events, without, however, requiring specific action. This type of case, despite the richness of content and information, ends up limiting the instructor or facilitator capacity to adopt discussion approaches on class, since there is not necessarily a debate on possible alternatives the entrepreneur could adopt.

When writing a teaching case, always keep in mind its application in the classroom, considering, beforehand, your target audience (undergraduate, graduate,



executive MBA or corporate training), a factor that can make all the difference, as it will allow you to choose the language used and the level of depth and detail of the case.

The development of the case should give maximum importance to the involvement of the students, since classes based on cases are inherently heuristic in nature, that is, learning is self-directed, and discussions are crucial for the learning environment. When deciding on the component information of the case, the authors need to be aware that they are feeding each of the possible alternatives to solve it; therefore, they must be presented in a simple and clear way, in order to facilitate their understanding and contextualization by the narrative. Such information allows instructors to integrate the student's prior knowledge with the topics discussed on the case. The more detailed are the information described in the case, the more arguments the students can use to defend their postulates that could solve the dilemma (Liesz & Pettit-O'Malley, 2016).

Garvin (2003) suggests that case authors start with discussion questions or alternative solutions to the dilemma. This technique provides a focus that the student can aim since the beginning of the reading, focusing the information and data necessary for he can reflect and debate the proposed questions, and then answer them.

When we put the student in focus while writing the cases, we see the importance of the concept of open narratives, which allow a persuasive interpretation of the facts, within a wide range of acceptable readings. When writing for the target audience, the case method becomes an acculturation process, in which students learn to structure and solve business problems, according to prevailing values (Greenhalgh, 2007).

The part of a case that is most difficult to develop, is probably the introduction of a plausible tension between conflicting positions, each one making sense under the right perspective (Garvin, 2003). The quality of a teaching case is reflected in its application in the classroom: if a case has, for example, three possible solution alternatives, and students clearly adopt all of them individually and equally, each with their own arguments and points of view, we have a satisfactory teaching case. On the other hand, if the majority of the students adopt only one of these alternatives, judging it to be the most appropriate, the expected debate turns out to be empty or even inexistent as everybody agrees with the same alternative, draining the instructor's power. The instructor limit him/herself to the simple task of presenting the outcome of the case and quickly jumping to the conclusions and lessons learned.



Although the benefits of the case method are indisputable, there is an inherent risk that instructors and, consequently, authors of teaching cases, are not aware of its limitations to adequately preparing students. According to Greenhalgh (2007), despite its verisimilitude - apparent authenticity, objectivity and mimeographic quality -, the cases are not, after all, real life, but partial, historical, incomplete and yet presented in narrative form. The conditions and characteristics described in teaching cases may be different if a student experience a similar situation along his/her career. Students must be conscious that what really counts in this type of learning tool is the way they rationalize and evaluate the given conditions, so the same skills can be applied when facing similar real-life circumstances.

REGEPE adopts the same criteria used by Harvard Business School to accept a teaching case to be published: on average, ten to twenty pages of text, with five to ten additional pages for the numerical and complementary material exhibition. (Garvin, 2003). Reviewers analyze the information, in general, is deliberately incomplete, thus giving rise to many possible response options; and, on the other hand, the degree of uncertainty is also deliberately measured. Thus, the case should give rise to more than one solution, but it needs to be complete enough to minimally support each proposed alternative, within the object of study under discussion. Students come to class properly prepared, with a decision recommendation and sufficient arguments to support and defend their position. Most cases take at least two hours to read and prepare. Students can analyze them in groups, with whom they share ideas, share responsibilities, and prepare their defense (Garvin, 2003).

Within the assumption that there is no right or wrong answer, the instructor must focus on complete or incomplete answers, since the degree of argument of the students is what determines the proper use of the case: when the student demonstrates success in understanding the problem, analyzing the information, demonstrating logical reasoning in the information processing and correctly use the concepts or techniques learned, which evidence and sufficiently support the choice of the best suggested course of action (Bridgman et al., 2016).

As Argyris (1980) rightly points out, in addition to the aspects previously mentioned in the preparation of the case by the student, the dynamics in the classroom must also be considered, as a successful debate does not only involve articulated defenses of arguments by the students. Debates require winners and losers, and sometimes the instructor's role is to incite, based on the case, students not only to



defend themselves, but to attack as well. Students prepared with arguments to defend their positions and also to overturn the postulates proposed by the other colleagues reach a better level of preparation of a case, because, by invading the points that are possibly poorly prepared or defended by others, they meet the full scope of coverage of a case discussion.

We also consider the recommendations of Liang and Wang (2004), which suggest special attention to the narrative of the case, which involves: the classification of the narrator (usually in third person, or in first person); the case structure (how the story is told); and the emphasis on the problem (when the problem is revealed and if there is one or more possible alternative solutions for it).

Successful teaching cases must be well planned. For that, the authors need to analyze, evaluate, interpret and synthesize information and ideas, according to the following steps (Lane, 2007): (1) define a central objective for the case, that is, a learning objective; (2) defining the target audience, for whom the language and structure of the case must be adequate; (3) deciding what information should be selected for the case (anticipating discussion questions can help, as they will serve as filters for this selection).

Unnecessary information for students may not be part of the case, but if it is useful to the instructor, it should be included in the teaching notes. In addition, the sequence in which the information is presented can be crucial, because the order of the narrative is not always chronological. Furthermore, if the author chooses to write the case, with the student as a focus, the emphasis should not only be on educational objectives, but also in an attractive and thought-provoking narrative, to attract and retain the student's attention, such as the resources of storytelling.

A satisfactory narrative is a well-told story of an event, which includes who was involved, what, when, why and how it happened (Lane, 2007). In addition, although there is a certain freedom to create data and information to make the case more attractive and didactic, authors need to be careful not to abuse this resource. The story must be authentic and not invented, at the risk of losing credibility and, by extension, its function: that of making sense to the reader, with coherent and complete information, without "loose ends", as facts disconnected from the case, narratives without continuity or contradictory data.

The final stage of development of a teaching case is its test, carried out, in general, with students, before submission for publication by the authors. One or more



real applications of the case, in legitimate classes, help not only to validate the case, but also to test the students' understanding of the narrative and the balance of action alternatives, which in turn allows for the receipt of feedbacks, useful for any adjustments in the case or in the teaching notes.

The students' conclusions, at the end of the debate, also provide important tips for improving the case. If the students or part of them do not reach the expected conclusions, it is possible that the case is not complete enough for its proper processing (Greenhalgh, 2007).

Of all the difficulties normally faced by small business owners worldwide, the current pandemic, caused by the COVID-19 virus, is an unprecedented challenge in world history. Certainly, as a side effect, it generated many interesting and exciting cases of adaptability and adequacy, which REGEPE would be pleased to share. We continue to look for inspiring teaching cases that encourage discussion, debate and learning; relying on our extensive network of authors to tell these stories.

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