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## Introducing the discovery case study: Brompton folding bikes

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### Introduction

This provocative instructional guide seeks to offer a learning design solution to the problem of student disengagement with case studies, and in particular, addressing the reluctance observed in some student groups to prepare for performative social learning encounters. It draws not only on the experience of the authors, but also on the shared experiences of case study delivery from various teaching focussed staff forums at Surrey Business School, University of Surrey. This paper briefly discusses a range of potential options before proposing the idea of a discovery case study. An example discovery case brief is presented and then supported with reflective teaching notes on how to optimally use this innovative approach.

By situating a learning challenge in a real-world context, case-based pedagogies can help learners prepare for jobs that do not yet exist by developing versatile problem-solving skills and experience (Schwartz, 2019). Often written using an empathetically compelling story of a business conundrum, case-based dilemmas can uniquely be told through the lens of an individual, giving a reasonably realistic sense of management in practice. Bonney (2015) found that a case study approach was not only more effective in promoting learning, but also developing written and oral communication and the ability to connect abstract concepts into the real world. However, Business School case studies usually comprise a narrative followed by discussion questions, perhaps containing circa 2,500 words typically, and longer Harvard Business School MBA style cases may stretch to beyond 30 pages. The authors surmise that this upfront independent engagement hurdle is one that time pressurised students can particularly struggle with.

### Problem statement

University students studying at business schools are not always enthusiastically engaging with the pre-assigned reading, with studies showing as few as one in five (20%) of students undertake pre-class readings (Deale & Lee, 2021). Zeivots (2021, p. 1) laments the influence of technology,

media, and apps as factors that have negatively impacted academic reading, noting that contemporary students "often struggle to read anything beyond an excerpt". This can be particularly problematic when a participative, experiential, or flipped classroom concept is being deployed, where, by fundamental design, the in-class interaction is reliant on building from prior knowledge gleaned from independent learning preparation. The phenomenon of a reduced appetite to prepare for live learning encounters, observed first-hand by the authors in Business School students in several different UK domestic and international settings, has also been seen to grow over the course of a term or semester, perhaps understandably because more attention is given to looming, terminal assessments.

Thus, tutors are faced with the problem of low social interaction between themselves and the majority of students in the learning space. This diminished in-class interaction manifests in low emotional energy, so it is difficult for the tutor to energise the class from the outset (Collins, 2004). Reaching that moment of energisation or collective effervescence, in Interaction Rituals Chain Theory (IRCT) terms, is difficult, hard work, and almost never materialises in this context. In such cases, the ritual of 'going to class' can be classified as a failed ritual - the lights are on, but nobody is at home (Collins, 2004).

Shernof et al. (2017) posit that students "taking notes, actively listening, and working on problems appeared to create a higher quality learning experience for themselves". Whilst Hoeft's (2012) study, focussed on why University students do not read, identified the primary explanation for unpreparedness given by students was that they were 'too busy', their energies are directed elsewhere.

This relatively frequent behaviour has been found to be a particular problem for small group case seminars, which can be as short as 50 minutes long in duration. When additional time has to be allocated to allow unprepared students to skim read the case content on arrival, it squeezes the available space for the high value social learning that students seem to appreciate, and even often enjoy when fully engaged with

case-based learning. Unfortunately, divergent attitudes to the importance of being prepared can create sub-optimal, two-speed learning environment that may problematically lead some students to value their formal instruction less highly.

Moreover, where there is diversity in English language capability within the cohort, as is often typical in Business Schools, required reading and processing times can vary significantly. This can result in simultaneously too much and too little absorption time being allocated, whilst the tutor iteratively briefs any late arrivals. This may further compound the challenge tutors already face with diverse international groups whose different cultural learning scripts can result in some students demonstrating their impatience and frustration (Read, 2020). Students who have arrived prepared are indeed eager to engage, often demonstrating a higher level of emotional energy. But if it is apparent that some participants are unprepared, this can lead to a stark reduction in the quality of discussions and result in a dilution of learning effectiveness. Activated participants can demonstrate their frustration at having to disproportionately contribute in-class. When this situation is repeated it may negatively impact their experience and willingness to continue to prepare and participate in future encounters, creating an undesirable negative reinforcement cycle.

At the same time, as students are increasingly being positioned as consumers of a Higher Education service, some faculty may feel less able to set and enforce historical behavioural norms, such as encouraging students to leave if they are not prepared and join a later class. Tutors who attempt to sanction unhelpful behaviours, from students who increasingly see themselves as customers, also risk being virally vilified in the court of social media.

### **Solutions:**

A number of alternative viable solutions are used that address the unpreparedness challenge, to some degree, and are certainly worthy of consideration for inclusion in a varied learning diet:

- Use short and very short cases – e.g., SAGE express cases (SAGE, n.d.) or concise one page news and business journal articles. This approach benefits from leveraging contemporary issues of the day, but at the cost of less deep engagement.
- Assess passive student attendance and/or in-class contributions and/or low stakes pop quizzes, solutions that are popular in North America, but difficult where solo staffing is the norm. It also goes against a UK Higher Education trend to explicitly avoid 'over assessing'.

- Perform an introductory 5-minute case summary 'review', perhaps using a short video and ideally drawing on student summarisation. However, this approach can perpetuate the expectation that substantive preparation is not necessary and reduce engagement further.
- Use a multi-module case example that several tutors deploy with a cohort, however, engaged student feedback here seems to indicate a desire for more variety rather than convenient repetition.

Taken in the round, all these robust and credible interventions have identifiable short comings and they do not offer the rich learning that can be gleaned from a more profound and immersive case experience. It is likely that former students-turned-educators of business will recall the light bulb moment when they cracked the 'weight not space' constraint in the FedEx case, or Honda's memorable emergent strategic conquest of the North American market, that was achieved through small scooters, and with not the big bike plan. Immersive storytelling takes time to connect with an audience profoundly and be transformative, and employers value the ability to solve complex, never seen this before problems (Mintzberg et al., 1996). Rushing too quickly to the answers in a thrice risks undermining the exhilaration that can come from the transition from frustrated head banging to unlocking a substantiated, viable solution (n.b. not 'the' solution). Interventions that masquerade as the thinnest veneers and that lend themselves to simplistic and formulaic solutions may drive adequate student satisfaction ratings from the majority, but they also endanger profound learning and development. And one of the most important benefits of a case study-based pedagogy, in the authors' opinion, is to develop the ability to absorb and analyse an array of informational elements in a more lifelike format and context. Working in groups, students also can develop their soft skills (e.g., listening, persuasion, negotiation, and team working) that are often cited as major employability shortcomings from traditional university programmes (Keevy, 2016). It is important to note that the 'real world' does not usually, systematically, serve up bite-sized executive summaries that highlight all the salient information, with a clear problem statement and compelling solution. So, another happy path is needed, one that removes the roadblock of pre-reading, but retains the more profound benefits afforded by case learning pedagogies.

### **Differentiating a discovery case study**

A discovery case study is distinctive from a traditional case study in that students are confronted by the questions first (rather than last) and then introduced to a modest range of resources that may help them, working together as a cohesive team, address the set questions. Again, different from traditional case studies, where all the necessary information is included within the confines of the case documentation, successful groups need to collaboratively mine their information sources (and perhaps use their own initiative to find others) whilst simultaneously putting in practice effective group working skills to build a clear

picture from their informational jigsaw pieces. Discovery cases do not implicitly assume that students already possess higher order group working skills, and therefore explicit focus is given to the lived group process in addition to the recommendations/question answers. Dolmans et al. (2015) might note similarities with Michaelsen's Team Based Learning (TBL), however, prior student preparation is presumed in TBL (Parmelee et al., 2012).

In framing the problem initially in the form of questions, students can be motivated to research with purpose, and within their group benefit from rapid peer feedback during discussions. With the tutor able to provide feedback, observations on the group processes, along with hints and tips on how to overcome any hurdles, their interventions can satisfy any needs for instant gratification and encouragement. With a high degree of self-directedness, rapid cycle peer and tutor feedback, an interactively facilitated classroom, and effective group leadership / management, discovery case studies can to some degree claim to directly address at least half of the top eight motivating factors for adult learners identified by Sogunro (2015).

Agile discovery case studies can evolve from a topical news item, guest speaker, business magazine feature, or YouTube video, and be embedded in the virtual learning environment quickly. Requiring a modest number of linked resources and no carefully crafted story narrative, once four or so questions have been developed, a discovery case can easily be created in half a day or less. Deployed systematically, this approach can also assist in a process of catalysing the ongoing refresh and development of the module curriculum.

Tutors who are familiar with the flipped classroom concept are likely to feel comfortable embracing the 'guide on the side' role that dynamically seeks to assess the way a group works in addition to the end-product, question responses (King, 1993). Learning facilitators need to be happy in their skin and feel comfortable to co-ordinate more loosely directed learning rather than play the 'sage on the stage' persona, and be relaxed working in an ambiguous, shades of grey co-creational environment where there are many ideas, not just a single right answer (King, 1993). Explicit process and skills focussed learning outcomes should progress over the course of a semester or term, with time given over to reflective discussions on the 'how' (process) as much as the 'what' (knowledge).

## Delivering the discovery case study concept

The discovery case should be ideally attempted by student groups of 3-5, who are able to arrange their seating to be able to see each other's faces and speak and listen to one another comfortably. This probably means trying to arrange the class in a flexible seating space (with comfortable bean bags and sofas preferably) that has double the capacity of the actual number of students attending. It is always good practice to encourage the development of a circle of trust for each and every learning encounter, and this should be achieved by introducing members names and a short icebreaking activity (e.g. introduce your shoes or favourite superhero).

The tutor might kick off the flipped case by playing a video short on a big screen, ensuring that the volume is pre-set for clear and comfortable acoustics. YouTube (or similar universally accessible video sharing platform) host popular, short form multi-media content that is becoming increasingly popular, and this resource may be mined for informative and evocative concise summaries (2-5 minutes), that whilst not comprehensive, may be sufficient to carry students over the break-through threshold. Activating the video subtitles function during playback and capturing a transcript of the video may further enhance the accessibility of the content.

In the following section the student facing briefing materials for a discovery case study about Brompton folding bikes is presented using URL links (live at the time of publication) to a pithy magazine story and supported with a number of YouTube video shorts. This discovery case was specifically designed for a master's level digital marketing module, an intervention that fell towards the end of the semester during assignment season.

An example of discovery case study student facing briefing materials <sup>[a]</sup>

**BROMPTON FOLDING BIKES**

**Address the following questions <sup>[b]</sup> in your social learning groups:**

- (1) Evaluate the effectiveness of your group's processes in extracting and analysing key information. What would you do differently next time?
- (2) Why, in 2017, was the Brompton brand in bad shape? Give specific examples of the challenges faced by the business and clients.
- (3) Using simple side-by-side customer journey maps, identify how a typical Brompton rider's journey differs from someone using a non-folding bike.
- (4) What are the general says and does/hears/sees/thinks and feels/pain/gain points (customer empathy mapping framework) that the 'A day in the life of a Brompton owner' video series identifies about cycling (any bike) in a city?

**Useful resources <sup>[c]</sup>**

Please read this short article two or three times by Davis (2017) [How Brompton Bicycles is overcoming purchase friction using content and social](#) featured as part of econsultancy.com's content marketing. Allocate group members to carefully watch two videos each, making sure your group watches all six videos. <sup>[d]</sup>

UGC Brompton user video: <https://youtu.be/z3ZncvrdB10>  
 Roos, Amsterdam: a day in the life of a Brompton owner: <https://youtu.be/SxP8LigkZAo>  
 Wil, Berlin: A day in the life of a Brompton owner: <https://youtu.be/KZcy-aZyx74>  
 Andy, London: A day in the life of a Brompton owner: <https://youtu.be/pKxuf5Wozbc>  
 Camille, Paris: A day in the life of a Brompton owner: [https://youtu.be/noQhs\\_zd9SE](https://youtu.be/noQhs_zd9SE)  
 Day in the life: Shanghai: <https://youtu.be/VReM2zhZdfs>

**Intended Learning Outcomes <sup>[e]</sup>**

After this learning intervention, you should be able to:

- (\* Evaluate your own group's planning and performance and be able to recommend better next time steps
- (\* Identify, evaluate, and summarise problems faced by a real business using secondary information sources.
- (\* Create and compare two customer journey maps.
- (\* Use the empathy mapping framework to analyse a customer consumption experience. <sup>[f]</sup>

## Teaching delivery notes

To emphasise this more ambiguous learning context, the authors decided it was not appropriate to provide a model answer, and therefore the contained teaching notes are entirely focussed on presenting tips and explanations using alphabetic context notes in square brackets.

[a] The discovery case is distinctive because it presents itself as a concise, one page brief that would sit comfortably in the top level of any virtual learning environment (VLE). Ideally it is presented in a form that is not overwhelming for students, with sufficiently stretching questions that will challenge the most able groups presented first.

[b] The often overlooked, implicit expectation for most teaching case study publication houses is that all the information required to address the set questions is included in the case text. Without a front-loaded case text, discovery cases brazenly break this often-unspoken rule, and challenge the idea of working towards a pre-determined, single right answer.

[c] Gone are the days when accessing the internet required a difficult to arrange timetable shift into the cramped computer labs, densely packed-out cheek by jowl with old-fashioned technology. Embracing the concept of BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) enables all the class to access the initial brief (on the VLE, not on the big screen), watch video clips and undertaking further research. In addition, it can also helpfully occupy a channel otherwise being used for other off-task purposes and encourage deeper group collaboration. In our experience, students usually have not just one suitably wifi-enabled device, but often two or three, however if technology (or power) accessibility is an issue then a computer lab may be a more convenient space to work in.

[d] A strong pointer is provided to suggest that, akin to a realistic work situation, there is not sufficient time for each individual to review all of the resource materials. This light touch direction is likely to see a range of different approaches utilised, specifically what were the different ways the groups used to agree to allocate work and how did they capture and share key information. The aim of the discovery case is to integrate a range of self-discovery lessons in group working. The tutor may expect to see an interesting discussion evolve around this topic.

[e] Primacy is given to process reflexivity to signal both its importance and simultaneously ensure that sufficient time is devoted to considering insights profoundly. If there is not sufficient time left to discuss the final question(s), then this might be covered in beyond class learning via a short wrap video from the tutor, or by encouraging all of the seminar group members to contribute to a discussion forum. Again, this reinforces the importance of the process and reflexivity (learning to develop an 'ever better' philosophy to group work) rather than being spoonfed any pre-determined answer.

[f] Tutors should be prepared to identify, and capture in a log, a range of unintended learning outcomes, recognising

that the more open, creative, co-creation process they are unleashing is likely to uncover serendipitous learnings. These insights could be used to inform the design and delivery of future discovery cases and form the inspiration for a pedagogic evaluation of their classroom implementation.

### Unintended learning outcomes log

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Extension questions for longer classes or assessments:

(5) What are the specific advantages (or unique selling points) and disadvantages (detractors) for Brompton's folding bike that are uncovered in the video-linked testimonials? How are these addressed?

(6) What persuasive marketing techniques are evident in Brompton's video-based campaign? Is this user generated content (UGC)?

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