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Developing Pedagogic Knowledge and Practice: How Case Studies Contribute to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Case studies have a broad range of purposes and forms in higher education. This commentary moves beyond considering the value of case studies for research and evaluation to explore how they can contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). We examine their alignment with the goals of SoTL and propose that they are particularly useful for making the complex, situated and often tacit dimensions of teaching and learning visible and accessible. We also overview a variety of forms that case studies can take in higher education. These forms may complement or serve as stepping stones towards research outputs, while also making valuable contributions in their own right. Specifically, case studies can support the construction of propositional, experiential and practical knowledge. This knowledge can be interpreted, adapted and reconstructed across contexts, thereby deepening practitioners' pedagogical knowledge and catalysing the translation of knowledge into practice. Importantly, cases do so by stimulating dialogue within and across teaching and learning communities. They therefore represent a relational form of scholarship through which practice can be articulated, shared and changed. When thoughtfully constructed, shared and engaged with, case studies provide flexible and accessible means through which higher education practitioners can reflect on practice, learn from it, and contribute to educational change.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Case studies provide a practical and accessible pathway for educators to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning and make teaching practices public for scrutiny and improvement.
2. Rich descriptions of teaching and learning contexts can help educators identify transferable principles that can be adapted rather than replicated in their own settings.
3. Case study outputs need not be limited to formal research papers and may include blogs, conference presentations, case collections and practice reports.
4. Creating and sharing case studies supports the development of pedagogical knowledge, including understanding what works, why, and under what conditions.
5. Case studies stimulate professional dialogue and scholarly translation, helping educational ideas move across disciplinary, institutional and national boundaries

Keywords

case study, scholarship of teaching and learning, pedagogical knowledge, professional development, scholarly translation

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Introduction

Case studies are a versatile approach to social enquiry that have been widely used across diverse fields such as health, anthropology, business, and law (Harrison et al., 2017; Miles, 2015). The key strength of a case study is that it can provide a holistic and in-depth account of a phenomenon, situation or social unit, with a focus on understanding what happens, why, how, and with what importance, in natural social settings (Merriam, 1985; Pearson et al., 2015).

Given this core strength, case studies have become increasingly prominent as a lens and strategy for understanding the highly situated and relational nature of teaching and learning in higher education (HE). However, despite their use as a research method (Purvis et al., 2026), case studies are often criticised for their limited generalisability, with detractors asking what value a detailed account of one case or a small number of cases can have for understanding and theorising practice (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Hammersley et al., 2009). As Harland (2014) notes, the centring of complexity and context in case studies means that "neither the researcher nor reader can truly replicate the study, they can only learn from it" (p. 1116). Yet this critique raises an important question for higher education practitioners: if teaching and learning are inherently contextual, how can insights generated within a particular course, programme, institution or educational setting contribute to knowledge and practice beyond that local context? As universities increasingly seek evidence-informed approaches to educational enhancement, there is a growing need to understand how case studies can support the sharing, adaptation and translation of practice across different disciplinary, institutional and national settings.

This learning is, we argue, of immense value to HE practitioners. However, the contribution of case studies extends beyond a singular role as a robust research methodology (Purvis et al., 2026). Case studies sit at the intersection of four important concerns within contemporary higher education: the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), the development of practice-based knowledge, the sharing of educational practice, and professional dialogue across teaching and learning communities. This commentary therefore explores a central question: how can insights generated through case studies be shared, adapted and translated across contexts in ways that support teaching and learning beyond the immediate setting in which they are produced? To address this question, we draw on literature relating to case study methodology, SoTL, and professional learning in higher education. We first examine how case studies extend beyond a research approach and align with the broader terrain of SoTL. We then explore the various forms that case studies can take and the contributions they can make to practitioners' professional development, before considering some practical matters of design, framing and ethics that shape what a case can offer. Lastly, we emphasise the value of case studies for building practice-focused knowledge, catalysing the translation of knowledge into practice, and stimulating dialogue that can prompt meaningful educational change. This commentary invites readers to deepen their understanding of how case studies can be used in HE, and how they can enrich teaching and learning, as well as teachers and learners.

From Research to SoTL: Broader Uses of Case Studies in Higher Education

Simons (2009) traces the origins of case studies in educational research to evaluation efforts in the United States in the 1960s and 70s, where the aim was to inform educational policy and decision-making through understanding "how curriculum programmes fared in action" (p. 15).

Case studies have since become a prominent form of educational research and evaluation, used across many educational settings from early childhood through to universities and professional organisations. Not merely a methodology nor simply a method, case studies are an ontologically and epistemologically agnostic research strategy that can be positivist, post-positivist or interpretivist in orientation (Harrison et al., 2017). Most commonly, however, case studies are invoked as an interpretive, naturalistic or constructivist approach to understanding a bounded phenomenon in context (Miles, 2015; Stevenson, 2004). When applied in research, case studies are broad in scope and can be adapted according to the purpose of the inquiry and the nature and number of cases (see Purvis et al. (2026) for guidance on conducting case study research in HE).

A focus on what case studies can offer educational research is unsurprising, given the longstanding emphasis on research as a core, and often essential, academic activity. However, a research-focused framing does not fully capture the wider uses of case study work in university teaching and learning. In particular, case studies are well-suited for the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). In the decades since Boyer (1990) positioned “the scholarship of teaching” as a legitimate and rigorous form of academic work, SoTL has become an increasingly important professional activity focused on improving learning and teaching in higher education (Chick et al., 2025). Although definitions are numerous, Felten's (2013) often-quoted 'principles of good practice in SoTL' specify that SoTL is a systematic form of inquiry that should be practice-focused, grounded in specific contexts, ethically and methodologically sound, and made public to enable critique, adaptation, and development.

We clarify here that we view SoTL and research (the “scholarship of discovery” in Boyer’s (1990) framework) as overlapping domains of practice in HE. This stance contrasts with the view that SoTL is not a form of research (e.g., Prosser, 2008), which often arises from the perception that it is “mostly small scale, short term and local” (McCormack & Baron, 2025, p. 611). There are now many education-focused journals that publish research papers which could be considered SoTL (Ashton-Hay et al., 2025). SoTL can, and often does, include research questions, an epistemological stance, theoretical foundations, and appropriate methods for demonstrating impact and furthering understanding of teaching and learning processes and conditions (Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015).

However, SoTL extends across a broader continuum than just formal research (Bernstein, 2010; Felten, 2013). Trigwell (2021), for example, defines SoTL as “making transparent, for public scrutiny, how learning has been made possible” (p. 287). From this expansive standpoint, SoTL can include reports, resources, guides, and descriptive or reflective narratives that are practice-focused, made public for critique, and draw on forms of evidence, but which are not designed according to the theoretical, methodological or evidentiary conventions of formal research projects. Such outputs can nonetheless generate accounts of practice that can play important roles in advancing effective learning and quality teaching in universities, answering questions such as: “What is?... What works?... Where?... When?... and For whom?” (Chick et al., 2025, p. 79). Their value lies not merely in reporting practice but in supporting the adaptation of ideas and approaches across contexts.

There are several points of congruence between case studies and SoTL in this broader sense. SoTL is, as Fanghanel (2013) points out, “deeply anchored in the discipline and at the same time vibrantly interdisciplinary” (p. 59). In other words, there is a huge range of possibilities for how to “do” SoTL, as well as who can undertake it. Case study approaches share this methodological and disciplinary eclecticism: they can be used across paradigms and

disciplines and can accommodate different kinds of evidence and storytelling depending on the purpose of the inquiry. In this way, both SoTL and case studies are accessible and useful for practitioners in a range of roles concerned with student learning, including academic, professional and "third space" practitioners (Whitchurch, 2008).

The most important point of alignment, however, lies in their shared sensitivity to context and complexity. Teaching and learning are inherently complex and situated undertakings. As just one example, student engagement can be best understood not as a simple outcome of a few variables, but as a dynamic interplay between various sociocultural, structural and psychosocial influences and conditions (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Similarly, the practice of classroom teaching is not merely a straightforward application of concrete steps but requires both careful planning and many in-the-moment decisions and actions (Miles, 2015), drawing on an array of disciplinary, pedagogical and tacit knowledges (Case, 2015). Making these influences, knowledges, decisions and behaviours visible requires an approach that can embrace and articulate these many aspects of situated practice. This is where case studies provide a particularly useful opportunity for meaningful and impactful SoTL inquiry. They invite practitioners to make the complexity and messiness of teaching and learning intelligible and accessible – and therefore act as springboards for dialogue, learning, application, and change.

A Spectrum of Case Study Forms

The forms that case studies can take extend well beyond research manuscripts or formal evaluation reports. "Case study" is also vernacular for scholarly communication that focuses on specific instances of teaching and learning practice. Such outputs make contextualised practice, reflection-on-practice, and provisional evidence about practice, visible in concise and digestible ways (Healey et al., 2020). Below we overview four common case study forms: online mini-cases, case collections, presentations and posters, and peer-reviewed practice articles. Although not exhaustive, these examples illustrate the range of case study opportunities available to practitioners beyond formal research and evaluation reports.

Online Mini-Cases

Case studies can include short-form "mini-cases" articulated through blogs and other snapshots of practice, often hosted on institution, association, or other sector-facing websites (Healey et al., 2020). For new scholars of teaching and learning this may be less intimidating than a research paper, and a useful entry point for "going public" with SoTL. For all scholars, new and experienced alike, mini-cases can also enable rapid dissemination of good practice or learnings from practice, supporting timely adaptation and implementation in other contexts. Some repositories of mini-cases are general in nature, covering a variety of topics (e.g. teaching practice case studies at the University of Lincoln (n.d.), Cornell University's Teaching Innovation Case Study Library (Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.), and University College London's (n.d.) case studies collection), while others respond to specific pressing issues in HE.

The recent plethora of online case studies on adapting assessment and teaching in the age of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is one such example. In the Australian context, mini-cases describing the design and trialling of innovative assessment and teaching approaches have been disseminated through higher education-focused blogs (e.g. Lodge et al.'s (2025) post on interactive orals), sector resources such as the *Academic Integrity Toolkit* (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2026), and a range of institutional

repositories. Examples include the University of Melbourne's *Interactive Oral Assessments: Case Studies* (University of Melbourne, n.d.), Curtin University's *Assessment Design Studio* (Curtin University, n.d.), the University of New South Wales' *AI Case Studies* and *AI in Education: Examples* (University of New South Wales, n.d.-a, n.d.-b), the University of Queensland's *Artificial Intelligence Forum* (University of Queensland, n.d.), and James Cook University's *Assessment Case Studies* (James Cook University, n.d.). These examples demonstrate how online mini-cases can circulate across institutional and sector-facing channels, making emerging practices and implementation experiences accessible to a wider audience. This can be of much value at a time when educators are seeking timely and context-sensitive responses to shared challenges.

Case Collections

Longer mini-cases, typically two–four pages, are also published as written collections or compendia. These are often developed through competitive grants, professional events or collaborative sector projects. For example, Advance HE's Global Impact Grants (Advance HE, n.d.-b) and Innovative Practice Grants (Advance HE, n.d.-c) aim to share case studies of impactful teaching and learning projects undertaken by member institutions. Meanwhile, the Assessment and Feedback Case Study Compendium (Advance HE, 2026) brings together cases of inclusive, authentic, and sustainable assessment and feedback design. Funded case study collections can also illuminate strategic and large-scale change initiatives, such as the move from semesters to block teaching through collections such as From Imagining Block to Enacting Block (Advance HE, n.d.-a) and Learn in Block (De Montfort University, n.d.).

We note that these examples are less accessible than the online mini-cases described above, with some resources available only to members of the funding organisation. They nonetheless function as opportunities for sharing practice in a relatively concise form and also for gaining recognition through competitive selection processes. These more developed accounts retain the accessibility and practice orientation of online mini-cases while explaining implementation approaches, contextual conditions, evidence of impact and practical learnings in more depth. The stronger emphasis on evidence compared to mini-cases can position these longer case study forms as useful resources for supporting strategic and systemic change, as demonstrated by the block teaching case collections (de Main et al., 2025).

Presentations and Posters in Scholarly Communities

Case studies may also be shared through presentations and posters at teaching and learning events such as the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Conference (Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, n.d.), the UK-based Advance HE Conferences (Advance HE, n.d.-d), and SoTL-focused events such as the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) Conference (International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, n.d.) and the EuroSoTL Conference (EuroSoTL, n.d.). Such events are an opportunity to engage with “communities of peers beyond the office next door” (Shulman, 1993, p. 7) and to talk about teaching and learning: to “explore research ideas and findings... discuss published work and its application to practice, co-create new ideas, investigate research agendas, and exchange practices” (Healey et al., 2020, p. 179). Although these forms of dissemination require a different set of skills to written case studies, including oral and visual presentation skills, presentations and posters may still be valuable case study outputs for both new and

experienced practitioners, furthering their professional development as scholars of teaching and learning.

Importantly, unlike static mini-cases, these forms of dissemination support synchronous dialogue between the authors of a case and those who may be interested in understanding and learning from the case. These are spaces – physical and virtual – where the "teaching commons" (Huber & Hutchings, 2005) can be felt and enacted. Pedagogical insights via rich and contextualised case descriptions are readily available, with audiences who are keen to engage with, question and adopt new approaches. Although not without access inequities and restrictions – particularly for in-person events – these community-based forums can help teaching initiatives to "travel" and translate into meaningful and impactful connections, collaborations and adaptations (Huber, 2009). Such interactions are particularly important because they enable educators to examine not whether a practice should be replicated, but how it might be adapted to suit different contexts.

Peer-Reviewed Practice Articles

A number of journals now feature non-research case study papers or practice reports. These are often peer-reviewed or editor-reviewed for quality and contribution, and thus present authors with the opportunity to undergo scholarly critique, while making their work public through a journal. Compared to the previous examples, these case study forms are more developed. While often shorter than a traditional research journal article, they are generally longer than cases found on websites or in collections, situate the case within the literature, involve critical analysis of the case, reflect on implications beyond the case, and may be similar in tone and style to a research article. For example, the journal Student Success includes a practice report format that aligns well with the goals of case studies. The journal specifies that practice reports should:

clearly show how the topic relates to or builds on existing knowledge and practice... explain why it was done, what was done, how it was done, and the impact (or expected impact) of the initiative... [and] identify the connection with transferable themes and principles of practice into other contexts. (Student Success, n.d.)

Other examples include the Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (n.d.), with a case study format that "focuses on an intense analysis of a specific teaching situation or problem that led to a solution"; and the International Journal for Students as Partners (n.d.), which publishes case studies alongside research articles, opinion pieces and reflective essays. The journal Case Studies and Scholarly Blogs in Scholarship of Teaching Learning (n.d.) is a peer-reviewed publication focused specifically on case studies and scholarly blogs designed to advance and develop the field of SoTL. As Healey et al. (2020) note, these case study forms can be "an excellent way to enter the world of publishing about learning and teaching", as they can "help you build your confidence and begin to develop your identity and voice as a writer" (p. 154). These peer-reviewed, scholarly formats can therefore serve valuable developmental purposes, while also allowing practitioners in many roles and at many stages of their scholarly journeys to publish case studies of good practice, and challenges in practice, for a scholarly audience.

Collectively, these examples demonstrate that case studies are not confined to specific national systems or educational traditions. Whether disseminated through institutional repositories, scholarly associations, conferences or journals, case studies provide a shared mechanism through which educators can exchange contextualised knowledge across

disciplinary, institutional and geographical boundaries. Their value lies not in promoting replication, but in supporting adaptation, enabling educators to interpret and apply insights in ways that respond to their own contexts.

Practical Recommendations for Case Studies

Case studies appeal to practitioners since they begin where practice already is: a module redesigned, an assessment trialled, a curriculum reformed. They also begin in a discipline. The variety of case study forms discussed above raises a practical question of how these forms of case study are best designed and framed. Here the disciplinary anchoring of SoTL noted earlier (Fanghanel, 2013) requires mindful considerations. As a first consideration, it is worth asking at the outset: who needs to read the case study (audience); what readers should be able to do afterwards (purpose); which output will best reach them (form); and what evidence would make that offering credible (claims). A mini-case for a programme team serves a different purpose to an explanatory case for a journal. Cases initiated because an approach worked and the practitioner would like this known produce a different account to those initiated because something remains unresolved.

A second consideration concerns the boundaries of the case. As noted earlier, case studies delineate a bounded system (Stake, 2003), yet in teaching and learning such boundaries are drawn rather than discovered. Naming the unit of analysis disciplines the inquiry; naming its context – disciplinary content, cohort, mode, staffing, institutional conditions – is equally important, to enable readers to construct knowledge from cases through "analogy and extrapolation" (Stevenson, 2004, p. 47). Treating a module or unit as the case, rather than the programme, the workload model, or the resources arrangements that shaped it, is an analytical choice that shapes what the case can subsequently explain and what readers will be able to make of it. Thin description could make a case study less transferable and usable.

A third consideration concerns the deliberation of ethical considerations, and here the relevant standard is relational rather than procedural. Case study work often involves students from one’s own teaching practice, colleagues and courses, and the risks of this dual role are unevenly distributed. Because the researcher is often also the practitioner, case study work in SoTL carries obligations that ethical approval alone does not discharge (Pearson et al., 2015). Lees et al. (2025) argue that participating in SoTL inquiry offers students learning opportunities of its own as they find the dual role exhibited by the practitioner less troubling and perceive participation less coercive. Where safeguards are calibrated to assumed discomfort rather than actual risk, students and associated stakeholders may end up being written about rather than written with - at a cost to them as well as to the case. Rather than applying a single standard in a case study design, it is recommended to judge ethical obligations proportionately and seek review early where data collection occurs.

A fourth consideration, and one especially relevant for practitioners seeking to contribute to their discipline as well as to educational leadership, is how a case is framed. As Healey (2000) argues, the scholarship of teaching develops within disciplinary cultures, and those cultures shape what practitioners take to be legitimate questions, credible evidence and contributions worth making (Huber & Morreale, 2023). Disciplines differ not only in what they teach but in what they accept as evidence, such that SoTL practitioners in two different disciplines may describe the same pedagogic initiative in markedly different terms. This variety is generative rather than problematic. However, it does mean that case study work benefits from deliberate choices, and working with that disciplinary shaping, rather than around it, is central to doing

case studies well. Educational inquiry is often positioned as competing with disciplinary research for scarce time; case studies could narrow that gap. Cases examining how students negotiate a bottleneck in disciplinary reasoning or are inducted into a signature pedagogy (Middendorf & Pace, 2004; Shulman, 2005), illuminate the discipline's own account of what it means to know and practise. A study of interactive orals in law may contribute more when framed as an inquiry into how students learn to reason as lawyers than as one into oral assessment in general. Such cases can therefore circulate through disciplinary channels as well as educational ones, as a subject association presentation, a mini-case or a practice article (Healey et al., 2020). Any conceptual framing attracts critique. Finding coherence between purpose and audience, form, boundaries, evidence and claims and between one's roles as a practitioner and disciplinary researcher of SoTL, could make case study research more transferable and the forms of learning that we consider next more likely.

What can be Learned from a Case?

In this final section, we address the practical significance of case study inquiry by considering what can be learned from case studies and how such learning informs educational practice. Beyond the professional development benefits discussed earlier, we argue that case studies can contribute to the development of pedagogic knowledge, support the translation of knowledge into practice, and stimulate dialogue that strengthens teaching and learning communities. In doing so, they can serve as a catalyst for meaningful educational change.

Stake (2003) suggests that case studies can generate two forms of knowledge: propositional and experiential. Propositional knowledge is formed through assertions about what is considered by the authors to be true about the case or about a broader phenomenon (Bassey, 1999; Stevenson, 2004). An example is the proposition that interactive oral assessments can reveal aspects of students' understanding and reasoning that may not be apparent in a written response. Meanwhile, experiential knowledge can be learned from a rich and evocative description of an event or activity that facilitates a vicarious experience of being there and experiencing what is described (Stake, 2003; Stevenson, 2004). For example, a detailed case description or vignette might describe an interactive oral in a detailed and life-like way, giving the reader a sense of having experienced the conversation. Stevenson (2004) offers a third form of knowledge that can be gained from case studies: practical knowledge "about how and when to do things" (p. 48). To impart this form of knowledge, a case might offer details about rubric design, logistical considerations, or a framework for designing effective questions. Although a case may not achieve all of these, all three forms of knowledge may emerge from a case study, depending on its focus, level of detail and overall design. In this way, case studies can deepen and extend pedagogical knowledge.

However, knowledge is not transferred directly from a case to an audience. Instead, case study accounts are akin to heuristics that provide a "vehicle for readers to reflect on their own thoughts and practices... and enrich their understanding of educational possibilities in terms of alternative ways of thinking and acting" (Stevenson, 2004, p. 47). In other words, knowledge derived from a case study or from a collection of case studies is constructed and re-constructed through a selective and situated process. A consumer of a case will not imbibe the learnings from the case in a direct or transparent way but will interpret and reinvent knowledge in ways that are more personally meaningful and useful to them in their specific circumstances (Stake, 2003). This knowledge reconstituted still carries much value. For both the authors and the audience of a case, it prompts reflection that renders tacit understanding explicit and provides opportunities to explore practice in new and varied ways (Miles, 2015).

Case studies prompt practitioners to question existing practices, engage with evidence and scholarship, and use what they learn to inform subsequent decisions. Case studies are therefore a catalyst for translating knowledge into practice, informing experimentation, evolution and innovation.

Critically though, this translation rarely occurs in isolation. Case studies that are read, reflected on, and translated, also stimulate dialogue. This dialogue might be local, among a teaching team, or more broadly across a discipline, institution, or even a sector (as with the example of interactive oral assessments following the emergence of GenAI). From dialogue flows connection, exchange and change. Matthews and others, (see Thakkar et al., 2026), propose that scholarship is best understood not as an output, but as "relational movement, where ideas take root through participation, conversation and shared spaces" (para 2). The authors call this movement "scholarly translation", a living process of "carrying knowledge across overlapping boundaries of people, practice, policy, and purpose" (para 5). Case studies in their full spectrum of uses in HE are key prompts for scholarly translation, providing concrete accounts around which practitioners can examine evidence, exchange perspectives and consider possibilities for practice. In the process, communities are built and enriched, as people come together to consider each other's diverse experiences and collectively assess what may be relevant to their own settings. Through this relational process, case studies can advance thoughtful, evidence-based and contextually responsive educational change.

Conclusion

Case studies are far more than a research approach, or an output that documents particular instances of teaching and learning. Across the spectrum of case study forms, from informal mini-cases and presentations to practice articles, evaluations and formal research, they provide ways of examining situated practice and making it available for public consideration. Rich, contextual accounts enable the construction and reconstruction of propositional, experiential and practical knowledge, prompting audiences to consider differences and similarities between settings, and to imagine and experiment with alternative – and improved – ways of understanding and acting.

This potential is realised when the boundaries, context and disciplinary framing of a case are clearly defined, and when purpose and audience are aligned with form. When thoughtfully constructed and engaged with, cases can deepen pedagogical knowledge, catalyse translation into practice, and stimulate dialogue within and across teaching and learning communities. This commentary contributes to higher education scholarship by reframing case studies not simply as a research methodology, but as a broader scholarly practice through which teaching and learning knowledge can be created, shared, translated and adapted. By bringing together literature on case study research, SoTL, scholarly communication and professional learning, we argue that the value of case studies lies less in their capacity for statistical generalisation and more in their capacity to support informed adaptation across contexts. As higher education systems worldwide navigate increasingly complex educational challenges, case studies offer an accessible and flexible mechanism for sharing practice-based knowledge and supporting the adaptation of educational innovations across institutional, disciplinary and national contexts.

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