

CUSTOMER SPOTLIGHT

Exit Lecture Hall, Enter Boardroom

How AMSOM Undergraduates
Are Learning by Leading



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Bringing Real-World Challenges to Life Through Active Learning

With so many distractions and diverse interests in today's undergraduate classrooms, educators must do more to reach students. One of the keys to unlocking their learning is to get them excited, says Shobha Das, dean and professor at Ahmedabad University's Amrut Mody School of Management (AMSOM).

A former student of the MBA program at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, Das has always been a believer in the case method's potential to excite students in the classroom. Rather than becoming overwhelmed by the material or lost in yet another

lecture, students could step into the boardroom and see how leaders solve problems and make decisions.

Over the years, Das—who was formally trained in 2007 after completing Harvard Business School's Program on Case Method and Participant-Centered Learning—has encouraged many faculty to transition from teaching through traditional lectures to adopting more active learning materials like case studies and simulations.

“Our university focuses a lot on interdisciplinary thinking, and the case method is a really wonderful way to do interdisciplinary work, especially with undergraduates,” she says, citing not only finance,



Ahmedabad
University

Amrut Mody School
of Management

LOCATION

Ahmedabad University, Central Campus,
Navrangpura, Ahmedabad 380009
Gujarat, India

PROGRAMS

29 undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, and executive education programs in the disciplines of commerce, business administration, management, and heritage management

ENROLLMENT

Over 3,785 students across 14 schools and centers

ACADEMIC APPOINTEES

175 full-time faculty

economics, and operations, but also sociology and psychology, particularly in terms of managerial incentives and societal context. “Graduates have deeper expertise in one area, but undergraduates are learning a variety of things, and cases really force you to think across those disciplines. That really makes a difference.”

Here, we’ll explore how Das and her colleagues at AMSOM approach active learning in their undergraduate courses—and how this work is impacting student learning.

Seeing Inside the Boardroom with Cases

For undergraduates, who typically have little workplace experience, getting a sense of what happens inside a boardroom as a decision-maker is transformational. “They get excited,” says Das. “We’re asking them to run a company or solve a business challenge as a leader or executive.”

Because cases generally feature actual companies, students often try to find out what the real CEO did, thinking that’s the solution. But they soon realize that’s just one potential path, as Das encourages them to explore other options by asking questions like: *Why did the CEO choose this? And what could they have done better if they had factored in other information?*

“It excites students that they can do better than what actually happened. The what-if scenario can be explored seriously, and it makes for very interesting class discussions because they are unbounded rather than being limited to the option taken.”

HOW IT WORKS

AMSOM students typically read a case and bring to class a one-page handwritten analysis, which counts toward their grade. This ensures they have read the

case and are prepared for the class discussion—as participation is also graded. Although for large classes, Das notes, participation usually is a bonus grade, given to those who make incredibly insightful remarks.

Zalak Shah, a marketing senior lecturer and area chair, begins class discussions in her consumer behavior courses by asking the same question students answered in their case write-up. She grades them on how well they articulate their position and how well their thinking relates to the learning objectives.

“This creates healthy competition in the classroom,” says Shah, adding that since active and meaningful participation leads to better grades, students are more inclined to speak up with their analysis of the case. “It’s fun for them as it’s not the traditional method of grading, and it gives them scope to explain their answers well.”

Some cases have short videos that professor Deepti Sharma likes to show students in her Sustainability Business in Society course. These videos give students background on the case before they are broken into groups to role-play with their peers. In the case **Gray to Green Transition—The Sustainability Journey of Dalmia Cement**, for example, students conduct a real-life negotiation role-play in their groups. Afterward, Sharma brings the class back together for a debrief discussion.

Rather than asking students to do case write-ups, Sharma ends case discussions with graded quizzes that test their knowledge. This helps to check their understanding of the course’s key concepts and ensures they attend class prepared, she says.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING BETTER

Teaching through cases also gives students opportunities to articulate what they read and then share their thinking with their peers. “They know they are not talking about arbitrary things, that they can be

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challenged in their opinions,” says Das. “So they have to have justification for what they say and be able to clarify their points.”

Students learn to question assumptions—both their own and their classmates’. They realize that not everyone has to agree, but there must be a reason for the disagreement, she continues. This forces students not only to think deeply before they speak but also to listen better to others.

“Young people have a more difficult time listening,” says Das, “but in a case discussion, they have to pay attention in order to build off what others have said. ... We are living in difficult times, so it’s good for students to hear other voices and understand other perspectives.”

CHOOSING CASES

Bijal Mehta, a marketing associate professor and major advisor, gravitates toward cases that present specific problems for students to grapple with. She prefers to have **data sets** or other supplements that students can use to work through the challenge. In her advanced Digital Marketing course, for example, she typically goes for cases like **Advertising Experiments at RestaurantGrades**, and in her AI Applications in Marketing course, she’s used cases such as **Artificial Intelligence: Stitch Fix—A Blue Ocean Retailer in the AI World**.

In these cases, especially the ones with quantitative and qualitative exhibits, students see multiple perspectives and must think beyond the obvious. “Sometimes information is hidden or missing; students

learn that they have to make decisions based on what is available,” she says. “This leaves a lot of food for thought.”

Students must imagine they are in the boardroom or meeting room and, as the decision-maker, ask themselves, *What information is missing? What additional information do I need from my team members?*

As a junior faculty member at AMSOM, Sharma specifically looks for cases with Teaching Notes, as she says they help her with grading and making answer sheets for midterm and final exams. “There is a lot of subjectivity in the courses I teach,” she says. “[Teaching Notes] really help me prepare what to teach and how to teach it in the class.”

Getting into the Managerial Mindset with Quick Cases

In recent years, Das has seen undergraduates struggling with long readings. “I find students will just try to summarize them, which is not the point,” she says.

Instead, she’s been relying on Quick Cases to start class discussions, pairing each case with a short HBR article or a news story on the same topic. These more bite-size materials draw from different sources, and they nicely capture students’ attention.

“Quick Cases are a good way to draw undergraduate students in because they don’t feel overwhelmed with



the amount of material, and they can draw on their own experiences,” she says.

Written by experts, Quick Cases and HBR articles are useful in getting students in the managerial mindset, more so than academic articles, which tend to be full of jargon, she explains. She’ll often put students in groups to discuss the cases, which allows them to build on each other’s experiences and points of view.

Recently, Shah has also adopted Quick Cases into her curriculum. “These shorter cases quickly get students interested and make it easier to dig into the data,” she says. She assigns them as a pre-class assignment or an in-class quiz, and class discussions play out more like role plays rather than a traditional case debriefs. Students generally come to class well prepared, she adds.

Stepping Fully into the Boardroom with Simulations

Having taught with simulations at other institutions, Das has been encouraging faculty at AMSOM to try them in their courses as well—at least in a class session or two.

“I am really pushing them,” she says. “And once they use simulations, they realize the engagement.”

Through cases and articles, she explains, students analyze data and think about business challenges as though they are part of the group in the boardroom. But in a simulation, students are actually *in* the boardroom executing those decisions in real time. So rather than imagining being a decision-maker, they become one, engaging with the market forces and reaping either the rewards or the penalties of their choices.

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“Undergraduates learn about the workplace through the simulation,” says Das. “They learn from each other as well, and when I meet students later, they often talk about simulations as experiences that allowed them to truly understand what managers do in the business world.”

Simulations also allow students to get a sense of the entire organization; it’s no longer just about the marketing function, but rather how marketing interacts with production and how production interacts with finance, she explains. “Students have learned about working capital, but during the simulation they find out that working capital is difficult to manage. They have to worry about inventory. So the connections start happening, and they come away with new realizations about the market and its customers, as well as internal stakeholders and employees,” she continues. “Simulations turn them into businesspeople before they hit the real corporate world.”

HOW IT WORKS

In her marketing courses, Shah uses a handful of simulations including **New Venture Simulation: The Food Truck Challenge** and **Pricing Simulation: Universal Rental Car V2**. “It’s been a really good experience,” she says, noting that she typically saves at least two hours of class time to dedicate to a simulation activity.

Sharma has students run through simulations, and then she does a full lecture to summarize the key takeaways. She also takes time in class to debrief and understand what students learned and how they reacted to the simulation. She’ll then revisit the key

takeaways again later in the course.

Using simulations excites students, she says, as they can relate theoretical concepts with real-life problems. She has also noticed students using the concepts they learned in their final group projects. “So it’s not just that one session or two sessions were useful in terms of making them understand a concept; they actually used and reflected that in their project,” she adds.

ENSURING STUDENTS’ SUCCESS

Because simulations can get complex, especially over time, undergraduates can fall behind if they don’t understand the course concepts. Das evaluates students’ progress multiple times through several rounds of a given simulation to help them stay on track, which encourages them to persist with their efforts—whether it’s investing in plant capacity that decreases profits in that round or it’s paying back loans, which decreases liquidity.

“Simulations aren’t one shot,” she continues. “And that’s a little harder with undergraduates, because they tend to last-minute cram; with simulations, you can’t do that. You make a decision for a company, analyze it, then go back and look at what you have done and what your competitors have done.”

While there is some hand-holding the first few rounds, she says, once students catch on, it becomes a frenzy. Once they get their results from the round, they want to jump right into the next to get a better score.

The decision about whether to run a simulation at the

beginning of the course or toward the end depends on where the students are in their four-year curriculum and on the complexity of the course, says Das. Her strategy students have already taken courses in both finance and marketing, so she's able to run simulations in the beginning of her course and over multiple class sessions.

The same principle applies to cases as well. Senior students can tackle a case, even a more complex case, earlier in a course, she explains, while younger students need simpler cases before building to denser cases later.

Finding Materials That Excite Students and Spark Their Curiosity

Searching for active learning materials on Harvard Business Impact's website starts with having an **Educator account**. Das tends to search by topics first. "If I want something on sustainability, I start with that and then narrow it down to what aspect of sustainability, such as carbon emissions," she explains. She then looks at what company the cases portray, as well as the authors, which are especially relevant for articles, where expert voices are most important.

It's important for undergraduate students to relate to these materials, so recency is a factor, she adds, noting that region also matters, especially to students outside the United States. "Students immediately switch in," she notes about using cases featuring local companies.

Harvard Business Impact's catalog continues to grow, adding more cases highlighting companies in India and other locations around the world, and this really helps, says Das. "When they read about something happening in their backyard, they're much more interested than when it happens in some faraway

place that they've never heard about. It really livens up the class."

Mehta agrees. "The idea of having more Indian cases is very helpful—also cases written by Indian authors. Somehow students identify with them more than cases written by foreign authors."

Variety Helps the Learning Stick

Students today face many distractions that can impact their focus and academic performance. At AMSOM, educators are using a variety of active learning materials that invite students to think critically, collaborate meaningfully, and engage deeply. These materials make learning digestible and get students excited to learn.

"Students want to apply their learning," says Das. "These materials form a nice basket of options that we can offer to help students apply theory to real-world issues in ways that are relevant to them."

This helps counter their lack of experience in the workforce with a diversity of ideas that they can build on. By going beyond the lecture and inviting students into the boardroom, educators ensure students achieve a depth of understanding while truly learning with excitement.

“ Sometimes information is hidden or missing; students learn that they have to make decisions based on what is available. This leaves a lot of food for thought. ”

BIJAL MEHTA, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR,
AHMEDABAD UNIVERSITY, AMSOM

CONTRIBUTORS

Shobha Das
Dean and Professor



Bijal Mehta
Associate Professor
and Major Advisor



Zalak Shah
Senior Lecturer
and Area Chair



Deepti Sharma
Professor



Top products used by AMSOM faculty

AMSOM instructors share some of their favorite cases, simulations, and videos to teach undergraduate students.

SHOBHA DAS'S PICKS

CASE

- Holding Fast (HBR Case Study)

SIMULATION

- Strategy Simulation: The Five Forces

VIDEO

- The Explainer: The Balanced Scorecard

BIJAL MEHTA'S PICKS

CASES

- Advertising Experiments at RestaurantGrades
- Artificial Intelligence: Stitch Fix—A Blue Ocean Retailer in the AI World
- Online Marketing at Big Skinny

SIMULATION

- Marketing Simulation: Managing Segments and Customers V3

ZALAK SHAH'S PICKS

CASES

- Dear Diary: My Heart Is Racing to Buy a Car

- Four Products: Predicting Diffusion

- Coca-Cola Goes Green: The Launch of Coke Life

QUICK CASE

- EPCorp: Sell on Amazon or Invest in Our Data?

SIMULATIONS

- New Venture Simulation: The Food Truck Challenge
- Pricing Simulation: Universal Rental Car V2
- Data Analytics Simulation: Strategic Decision Making

ARTICLE

- Tailoring Your Strategy to Fit the Culture

DEEPTI SHARMA'S PICKS

CASES

- Gray to Green Transition—The Sustainability Journey of Dalmia Cement
- Cisco Systems Inc.: Caste Conundrum Regarding Diversity and Inclusion

SIMULATIONS

- LiveCase Simulation: Alpha—Circular Economy
- Sustainability Management Simulation: Net Zero

Teaching Resources



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