

# The Case Study Method: How AELO Swiss Academy Turns Theory into Decision-Making Practice

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The question lands on the table before anyone feels ready. "You have the contract in front of you. What do you do?"

For a moment, the room goes quiet. Twenty-four professionals sit around five tables, notes open, pens hovering. There is no slide to check, no chapter to flip back to, no answer key at the back of the packet. Just a messy business situation, a stack of numbers that point in slightly different directions, and a roomful of people who now have to commit to a position out loud.

That silence is not a flaw in the teaching. It is the teaching.

At AELO Swiss Academy, the case study method sits at the center of the learning experience, and the quiet moment after the opening question is where the real work begins. This approach to turning theory into decision-making practice has a long history, a clear logic, and a few honest limitations that any serious program has to design around. Here is how it works in practice, from the first pre-read to the final vote.

## A method with a long memory

The case method is older than most people assume. Harvard Law School began teaching with recorded legal cases in the 1870s, on the theory that students learn law by reading how courts actually reasoned, not by memorizing rules in the abstract. Business schools picked the idea up roughly a century later and adapted it. Instead of court rulings, students received company histories, financial statements, market data, and a decision that someone in the real world had to make under pressure.

The underlying insight has not changed since: judgment is a craft, and crafts are learned by doing the work under supervision, repeatedly, with feedback.

That idea fits comfortably into Swiss education culture. The apprenticeship tradition here treats learning by doing as the default, not the exception. A future electrician wires actual circuits under a master's eye. A future hotelier works actual shifts. AELO Swiss Academy extends that same instinct to business and management education: if the goal is better decisions, then students should spend their classroom hours making decisions, defending them, watching them get picked apart, and making better ones the following week.

Lectures still exist in these programs. But they play a supporting role. The spine of the curriculum is the case.

## Why theory alone wobbles

Anyone who has taken a business course knows the feeling of the clean slide. Here is the framework. Here are the four boxes. Here is the formula. Everything is labeled, everything fits, and for an hour the world looks tidy.

Then real work starts, and the tidiness evaporates. The market data arrives three weeks late. The finance numbers contradict what operations just said. The competitor does something no framework predicted. The theory you learned is not wrong, it is simply incomplete, because frameworks describe categories of situations while decisions happen in one specific, lopsided situation with a deadline attached.

This gap between knowing and deciding is exactly what the case method attacks. A well-written case hands you the mess on purpose. The exhibits overlap. The data has gaps. Some of what you need is missing and some of

what you have is noise. Your job is to frame the problem, pick what matters, choose a course of action, and explain why.

The beauty of doing this in a classroom is the cost of failure. A manager who misjudges a pricing decision at work may live with the consequences for a year. A student who misjudges the same decision on paper fails cheaply, in a morning, among peers, with an instructor close enough to show exactly where the reasoning bent. Over a program, students rack up dozens of these rehearsal decisions. That volume of practice, with feedback attached, is what builds the judgment that a lecture alone rarely delivers.

## **Inside a typical session**

A case week at AELO Swiss Academy follows a rhythm that becomes second nature after the first month.

The packet arrives three or four days before class, usually eight to twelve pages of narrative, exhibits, and sometimes a memo written by a character in the case. Students are expected to spend roughly sixty to ninety minutes preparing, and the expectation is specific: come with a decision, not just an opinion. Cohorts stay small, around twenty-four students, seated at tables of five or six, because the format depends on everyone speaking at some point.

The session itself runs about ninety minutes. The instructor opens with a short framing, rarely more than fifteen or twenty minutes, that connects the case to the theory students have been studying. Then the floor changes hands. A cold open puts a student on the spot with the central question, and from there the class builds an analysis together on the board: options on one side, assumptions in the middle, evidence pulling in various directions.

Toward the end, the instructor forces closure. Everyone votes. Not "it depends," not a hedge, but a decision, recorded. Then comes the debrief, where the instructor lays out what actually happened in the real situation the case was drawn from, and the class compares its reasoning against history.

Participation is assessed on quality rather than airtime. A student who speaks once and moves the analysis forward scores better than a student who talks constantly without committing to anything. Within a day, each student also submits a one-page decision memo: the choice, the three strongest reasons for it, and the assumption that, if wrong, would change everything. Writing the memo is where a lot of the learning quietly consolidates.

## **One case, start to finish**

To see why this works, it helps to walk through a case the way a cohort does. The example below is a composite, the kind built from common patterns rather than any single company's private details, but the dynamics are the ones students meet again and again.

The situation: a family-run chocolate maker outside Bern, about forty employees, one production line running at eighty-five percent of capacity. The company sells premium bars to specialty retailers at CHF 4.20 per unit, with a unit cost of CHF 2.60. A German discounter offers a three-year contract at CHF 2.95 per unit for a volume that would roughly double total output. Taking it would require a second production line, priced around CHF 1.8 million with an eighteen-month lead time. The board meets Monday. Decide.

The instructor opens with a deceptively simple question: does this contract create value or destroy it? A student who works in banking goes first and does the arithmetic out loud. At the discounter's price, the margin per bar shrinks from CHF 1.60 to CHF 0.35. The incremental volume is real, but each incremental bar earns a fraction of the current one, and the new line has to be paid for out of that thin spread. Her vote, tentatively: decline.

A second student, a hospital administrator with no finance background, pushes back from a different angle. The company's customer base is concentrated, she points out, and one lost specialty chain could hurt more than any margin math. The contract diversifies risk and funds capacity the [https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone\\_from\\_aelo\\_swiss\\_any\\_advices/](https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/) firm will eventually need anyway. She would negotiate, not accept: a smaller volume, a higher price, maybe CHF 3.40.

A third student raises the question nobody has touched. What does a discounter shelf do to the premium brand? If the specialty retailers paying CHF 4.20 see the same bar at CHF 2.95 next door, do they walk, and what is that worth? Nobody in the case packet can answer it. That, the instructor notes, is itself a finding: the decision hinges on an assumption the data cannot settle, so the team has to decide how much certainty they need before signing.

By the final vote the room splits roughly down the middle, which is common in a good case. The debrief then does the heavy lifting, pulling the discussion apart to show what each position got right. The banker framed the problem as return on capital. The administrator framed it as risk structure. The brand question turned out to be the crux, and the strongest memos the next morning were the ones that named it explicitly and said what evidence would resolve it.

Notice what the students practiced in ninety minutes: contribution margin, break-even thinking, customer concentration, brand positioning, negotiation strategy, and decision-making under incomplete information. No single lecture could have wired those ideas together. The case did it by making them necessary.

## The instructor's job is to not have the last word

Case teaching looks effortless from the back row and is anything but. The instructor's hardest discipline is restraint. Give the answer too early and the room stops thinking. The craft lies in the follow-up questions: what would have to be true for that to work, what number are you leaning on, what would change your mind. Silence is a tool here. A teacher who can sit through eight uncomfortable seconds usually gets a better question from the class than anything on the lesson plan.

Good case instructors also protect dissent. When one table argues for an unpopular position, the instructor's job is to keep that argument alive long enough for the room to test it honestly, because the minority view is often where the hidden assumption lives. Frameworks get introduced at the moment students feel the need for them, not before, which is why they stick. A five-forces diagram drawn after students have personally wrestled with competitive pressure means something. The same diagram drawn cold on a slide means very little.

## Where the method strains, and how to compensate

An honest look at the case method has to admit its weak spots, because every teaching format trades something away.

Novices can flounder. The method assumes students bring enough baseline knowledge to contribute, and a complete beginner may sit through a session absorbing little. Cases also under-teach procedural skills; you will not learn accounting mechanics or statistical testing from a discussion, no matter how lively. There is a subtler risk too: heavy case exposure can tempt people to generalize from single vivid stories, and loud voices can dominate a room unless the facilitator actively manages the floor. AELO Swiss Academy addresses these gaps by blending formats deliberately rather than treating cases as the only tool.

| Format | What it builds best | Where it falls short |

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| Lecture | Shared frameworks and vocabulary | Weak transfer to messy, real decisions |

| Case discussion | Judgment, trade-off reasoning, communication | Uneven technical depth, depends on facilitation |

| Lab or simulation | Procedural skill with fast feedback loops | Narrow scenarios, little human or political texture |

The blend matters more than any single ingredient. A micro-lecture gives students the vocabulary for the week. A quantitative lab makes sure the spreadsheet skills hold up. The case then forces everything to survive contact with ambiguity. Each format patches the others' holes.

## How to show up ready

Preparation separates the students who grow from this method and the ones who merely attend it. Experienced instructors tend to give the same advice to new cohorts, and it boils down to five habits:

1. Read the case twice, once quickly for the story and once slowly for the numbers in the exhibits.
2. Write down your decision and three reasons for it before class, in full sentences.
3. Pick one number you could defend from the exhibits if challenged.
4. Draft the strongest argument against your own position.
5. Note what evidence would make you change your mind, because that question will find you.

Students who follow this routine consistently report that the classroom discussion feels less like an ambush and more like a 检验 of work they have already done. The phrase in the middle of that sentence matters: the case room is not where you form your view, it is where you stress-test it.



## What a year of deciding does

The changes that come out of a case-based program rarely show up as quotes from a textbook. They show up as reflexes. Alumni describe sitting in a meeting, hearing a confident proposal, and automatically asking what would have to be true for it to work. They describe separating reversible decisions from irreversible ones, spending energy where it counts. They describe getting comfortable saying "my