

---

# REACHING THROUGH TEACHING

---

A NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTING CLASSROOM PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE AMONG KENNESAW FACULTY

VOLUME 7, NUMBER 2 • WINTER 1994

---

## The Agony & The Ecstasy of Case Teaching

Peter Chiaramonte, Ph. D., Associate Professor of Communication

Educational consultant George Leonard has referred to the exclusivity of the lecture system as “the best way to get information from the teacher’s notebook to the student’s notebook without touching the student’s mind.” He reminds us that what passes for routine “classroom control” isn’t just dull or boring, it’s downright tragic.

The most successful classroom teachers spend a good deal of their time planning their course objectives according to what students can do as a result of each session. Beyond planning the objectives and content, the best deliberately weave in a variety of learning methods—some lectures, case discussions, special guests, student role plays and presentations. There’s no mystery about it. A healthy mix of teaching methods facilitates the relationships between teachers and students, students and students, and teachers and teachers.

### What Is A Case?

A case study is a record of an issue actually faced by a decision-maker, along with the surrounding facts, prejudices and opinions upon which the decision must be made. Although most cases serve as vehicles to teach critical thinking skills, others also serve to describe situations, to report research results or to engage in the use of conceptual schemes.

Although cases are most commonly used in professional

schools such as business, law, medicine and education, they play a role in the practical application aspects of all academic disciplines. In a

ute to the analysis and solutions of relevant issues they will face beyond the gates of the academy. Furthermore, they allow students

and professors alike to “put it all together”—by integrating disciplines and approaches in a variety of ways that clarify their understanding of the subject, and to teach them how to operationalize theory with practice.

Learning from one’s peers is another important development skill for students. The student analyst learns that others have perceptions and insights he or she may have initially overlooked in his or her

own personal examination. Because so much of our contemporary workplace revolves around teamwork, it is well to develop positive attitudes about the contributions others can make to our understanding.

### Managing The Process

If conflict is the essence of drama, then case discussion will be interesting only if it has some drama. Therefore, professors should encourage different points of view from the participants and withdraw from the debate unless it is not building or is somehow wandering off course.

### Reaching Gets New Look

*For years Reaching Through Teaching has been a primary source of communication about teaching among faculty.*

*But as we grow, the need for more information grows as well. To accommodate more information, we have redesigned Reaching Through Teaching. You will notice shorter articles, more lists and numerous abstracts of teaching research being conducted by our faculty.*

*I hope this format helps expand the sharing that takes place among faculty about teaching and learning. Your suggestions and advice for future issues—as well as articles—will be greatly appreciated.*

music history class, for instance, the case of a symphony conductor who has to introduce a Wagner encore to an audience in Tel Aviv shortly after the Second World War presents a unique decision-making situation that expands classical music beyond the keyboard into its social relevance. In each subject area, case studies can be used to simulate or describe real situations, and to allow students to practice some of the skills required of professionals in that field.

### Why Use Cases?

Cases bring real problems and actual experience into the classroom and allow students to contrib-

Knowing when and how long to step back from a discussion is more of an art than a science.

Backward chaining is another technique used by case teachers. Inexperienced students may be prone to over-analyze and under-recommend. Asking for a thumbnail sketch of the proposed action first, and then backing into the analysis that led you there emphasizes dealing with the most important information first.

Excellent case teachers have a clear idea of what they hope to accomplish in each session, but they avoid interjecting their own viewpoints until the end of the case. Premature interjection tends to sour

a good discussion because of the professor's added authority.

The last 10 minutes of any class might well be taken up with students' reflections on what they have learned from the case. The professor should list those points, and then tell them anything that remains to be learned as a part of the session objectives. Professors remind the students how these learning points are important in practice, and explain the reasons. They also indicate what areas in the discussion might have been developed further.

### **A Case For Cases**

Teaching with cases is not a perfect teaching method. Never-

theless, if it is used wisely, its disadvantages (it only simulates reality) are far outweighed by its advantages (it challenges and develops active student participation and appropriate creative and critical thought processes). Cases expose students to a variety of "real world" situations and help to develop expertise and wisdom in an environment of risk. They help students see problems, issues and principles central to their professional role. For the professor, cases can be used to synthesize knowledge and events occurring in more than one real situation. Above all, cases demonstrate the responsibility of students as sources as well as receivers of knowledge.

## Ten Criteria for Selecting Cases

1. Is it a true case? A true case is a record of an actual decision that has been faced. Hypothetical cases are rarely as effective.

2. Is there a decision-making dilemma? Easy or obvious decisions make for lousy cases. The best are those that require rigorous evaluation to determine their effectiveness.

3. Does the case tell a good story? Like all good stories, good cases must have an interesting plot. There must be drama, suspense and an issue worth investigating.

4. Are there sufficient details? The case should provide enough relevant

information for students to identify with the situation and to empathize with the central characters.

5. Is it written clearly and coherently? It helps if specific names, dates, times and amounts are used. And it should be written in plain English. Optimum length is 12 pages.

6. Are there descriptive sub-titles? Outlining by sub-titles gives students an idea of the flow of the case, and it sets a framework within which data can be assessed. Analysis and interpretation will be more orderly.

7. Does it teach the skills you want? The best cases teach students deci-

sion-making processes that can be applied to other cases and other subjects.

8. Are assignment questions suggested by the case? The instructor should be able to identify key questions generated by the facts of the case.

9. How well does the case "age?" The relevance of a case may change with time. Even the best case may need polishing if it contains worn and outdated language.

10. Does the case suggest additional courses or uses? Potential uses of the case might identify other courses or topic areas for discussion.

## ***A New Perspective on an Old Course: Government in a Global Perspective***

Helen S. Ridley, Ph. D., Professor of Political Science

Change does not come easily to academe, and especially not to a "bread-and-butter" course like American Government. At KSC, more than 3,300 students enroll in American Government (PS 201) each year because the state requires all University System stu-

dents to complete a course in American government.

To meet the staffing requirements of this course, each of our political science professors as a rule teaches one or more sections each quarter. The importance of this teaching responsibility is evi-

denced by the fact that candidates for positions in political science must demonstrate the ability to teach PS 201.

Not all political scientists, however, have the same academic training. As with most disciplines, political scientists specialize in graduate school. Some focus on traditional areas of government such as the legislative, judicial or executive branches. Others go into public policy or administration. Still others concentrate on comparative politics or international affairs.

As a result, American government courses at some colleges