

Cases Can Stimulate Student Learning

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THE CASE METHOD IS NOT A NEW TEACHING TOOL. Its earliest forms were fables and parables and it was popularized by the Harvard Business School in the 1880s. Cases have been used extensively in industrial management training and collections are being marketed by the educational publishing community. The case study method has been a successful teaching strategy for promoting higher-order thinking skills. This method works well with undergraduates and graduates, with individuals and groups, and in a variety of content areas. The purpose of this article is to answer questions about the use and development of cases for instruction.

What is a case?

A case is a description of a real or hypothetical situation reflecting experiences actually encountered in the discipline under study. Its use gives students an opportunity to put themselves in the decision-maker's or problem-solver's shoes.

Which disciplines are appropriate for cases?

Any discipline can use this instructional tool. In addition to business/industry, the use of cases has been reported in a variety of content areas including medical fields, social work, the sciences, robotics/computer science, languages, library/information studies. My own use has been in the areas of teacher education and instructional technology. My best examples have been in the application of principles guiding the "fair use" of copyright law (decision-making), application of motivation theory in project management (problem-solving), and the application of models in instructional design (decision-making and problem-solving).

Why should cases be used?

Primary among many advantages is the case's ability to increase retention and foster critical-analysis and problem-solving skills. Cases promote active student participation and provide relevance, both of which are motivating factors for learning. Well-developed cases can incorporate theory and practice, support multidisciplinary perspectives, and allow simulation of diverse and inaccessible settings. The use of cases with groups has improved group process skills, but cases are also appropriate for individuals. Cases usually do not have one "right" answer so they allow different approaches to decisions/problems.

Do cases have limitations?

Yes. Some of the advantages are also disadvantages. Because cases do not provide one right answer, instructors and/or students who are uncomfortable with multiple possibilities, may not feel satisfied with this method. Cases can be time-consuming, requiring instructors to be selective in the content and principles assigned to the case method. As cases only simulate the student as decision-maker or problem-solver and do not provide the real experience, they may not convey the complexity of the real situation. And finally, the case method requires a highly skilled instructor to lead/manage the case debriefing.

What is the role of the instructor?

The critical role of an instructor who uses the case method is creator of a positive, accepting environment for student sharing. This involves modeling active listening and openness to diverse approaches and guiding the debriefing discussion to intended learning outcomes.

How is a case used?

As with other instructional methods there are pre-, "during," and post-instructional procedures that affect learning. Before instruction, the instructor must decide on lesson objectives, select or design an appropriate problem situation, and organize resources/logistics. Steps to follow during a case study lesson are: orient students to the problem, organize students for studying the case, present any artifacts or exhibits, and assist students in their independent or group investigation. Following student investigation of the case, the instructor must conduct a debriefing with the students. This discussion allows students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize their responses. It allows the instructor to analyze and evaluate the problem-solving process and to assess students' individual and group performances.

Are there different types of cases? Yes. The most common type is the printed narrative. Others which may be more motivating are those written as a memo or letter, an editorial, or a mono/dialogue. Audio or video productions make the case more realistic.

How is a case developed?

The following steps are recommended:

Step 1: Think about your course content and choose an area which requires higher-order thinking skills.

- Step 2: Make a problem situation out of the topic. Define the problem for students or allow students to define the problem themselves. Select a context your students will enjoy and find meaningful.
- Step 3: List pertinent and irrelevant information to be included. Get ideas from colleagues.
- Step 4: Include plentiful characters, who are doing things right or improperly. Bring them to life by giving them names, titles, responsibilities, attitudes, values, etc.
- Step 5: Develop fully the details surrounding events, problems, and personalities.
- Step 6: Generate questions to guide students' thinking about the problem(s) to reach the concepts/principles involved.
- Step 7: Review your case against the guidelines checklist (below) and revise.

Case Design Guidelines

Subject matter is realistic.
 Length is appropriate.
 Facts are presented sequentially, clearly, and briefly.
 Facts are adequate to resolve case.
 Characters are believable and interesting.

Known situations are not recognizable.
 Conflict or friction points are included.
 Irrelevant details are included.
 The problem is open-ended.
 The problem is likely to stimulate discussion/debate.
 Multiple solutions are possible.
 Solutions are not given or implied.

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Teaching International Politics: An Active Learning Model

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INTERNATIONAL EVENTS AND ISSUES, usually taking place thousands of miles away, are frequently perceived as having little direct impact on our daily lives. Foreign names and places, often "strange" and "obscure," further reinforces this perception of irrelevance. Hence, other than the most obvious effect that a major conflict in Mideast might have on the oil price, many people have difficulties identifying the specific impacts of the international politics on their daily lives and/or their communities. As a result of this "disconnection," the majority of the general public have developed an indifferent attitude toward foreign events, or a disinterest in global issues.

I believe that the perceived irrelevance and insignificance of international events and issues is definitely a major roadblock to effective learning of international politics, especially in retaining and applying the materials. However, the solution to this problem seems to go beyond the simple task of "keeping them informed." Even with the discussion of the concept of "interdependence" and ample examples of the U.S. relations with

the rest of the world, which supposedly prove the point of the domestic-international linkages, interests in international affairs might be enhanced only marginally. It seems that the real problem is greater than sheer ignorance or mis-perception; it might have something to do with the pedagogy: how information is delivered and presented by the instructor and how it is received and evaluated by the students.

To address this problem, I begin to look for ways to redesign my teaching plan and re-organize materials so that not only will the domestic-international connections be highlighted in a more explicit fashion, but also be more appreciated by students, so as to change their perceptions and attitudes, and remove their mental blocks.

International Politics: the Learning Process Revisited

In my own analysis, besides the mis-perceived domestic-international disconnection, the conventional way of teaching international politics might have contrib-