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WELCOME TO THE CASE METHOD!

In this introduction, I want to provide you with an overview of the "case method" of teaching and learning, and with some basic ideas for teaching with cases and writing your own cases.

The case method has been practiced in the United States for many decades. It was made famous, first, by Harvard University's Business School and, later, by Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Now cases are widely available from these two schools as well as via the World Wide Web. The primary use of the case method continues to be in professional education and training -- business, public administration, planning, and related fields -- in the United States and, to an increasing extent, in countries throughout the developed and developing worlds. But the case method is potentially appropriate for any teaching and learning situation: undergraduate, graduate, and professional.

Despite its apparent popularity, the case method remains controversial, and case teaching is not as widespread as its effectiveness would suggest. This is so for two reasons. First, most of us who teach or train others have learned by traditional methods -- lectures, seminars, problem sets, and examinations -- and we tend to teach as we ourselves have been taught. Second, because it is unfamiliar and a bit mysterious, the case method requires teachers and trainers to acquire new skills and attitudes towards teaching, a process which takes the kind of time and opportunity that most of us do not have because of our busy schedules. It seems much easier and safer simply to lecture, even if, as students, we were bored by lectures.

Those who have made the effort to learn about and apply the case method in their teaching and training come to feel, most with great enthusiasm, that they have become better teachers for having made the effort. I believe that you will come to feel that way, too.

This article is adapted from What is the Case Method? A Guide and Casebook (1996), published by the Foundation for Advanced Studies on International Development (FASID) in Japan. The article is provided for subscribers of the Electronic Hallway system with the express permission of the author Laurence E. Lynn, Jr. of The University of Chicago and with the permission of FASID. The ideas discussed in this paper are also covered at length in Dr. Lynn's book Teaching and Learning *with* Cases A Guidebook (1999), pubished by Chatham House Publishers, Seven Bridges Press, LLC.

Why Do You Teach?

As a teacher, trainer, or facilitator, you face a strategic question: What are your objectives? I like to pose this question as follows: In what way do you wish to enhance your students' abilities as a result of their having taken your course, seminar, or workshop? When I pose this question, workshop participants usually identify some or all of the following purposes for teaching

* Convey to students knowledge, facts, information;

* Improve students' mastery of theories and their applications, e.g., negotiation theory, benefit-cost analysis, risk assessment, econometric methods;

* Enhance students' decision making skills, as an intellectual process, or as a group, social, or political process;

* Improve students' technical or behavioral skills in analyzing data, presenting findings, working as a team, or leading a group;

* Improve students' critical, analytical, and reasoning skills;

* Enhance students' personal confidence, willingness to speak up and act;

* Increase students' desire to promote change and reform;

* Change students' attitudes;

* Stimulate student interest or curiosity in a subject or problem; and

* Create shared experiences that will be useful in subsequent classes.

Of course, you as teachers or trainers usually have several purposes in mind, whether you are teaching a single class or an entire course. My point is that it is important for you to be clear about these purposes and about their relative importance in confronting a second strategic question: How can I most effectively accomplish my pedagogical purposes?

There are many ways by which you can further student learning. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. The following list merely hints at the possibilities:

* Lectures, i.e., planned, formal presentations;

* Socratic method, interrogation, dialogue, debate; small group discussions, study teams;

* Critical incident analysis, i.e., close analysis of a particular event or decision;

* Role play;

* Exercises/problem sets;

* Internships/field placements;

* Participant observation;

* Case teaching; and

* Other innovative teaching/learning approaches.

For a given set of pedagogical purposes, the case method is not always the best or most appropriate approach to student learning. For example, the mastery of facts, technical processes, the formal logic of models and concepts, the content of literature, and the ideas of experts are often important objectives best pursued through lectures, small group discussions, and problem sets: the so-called traditional approach. Nor is the case method the only way to create real-world-oriented, experience-based learning opportunities; internships, field placements, and field research assignments are often effective in giving students experience with real-world problem analysis. Even an intense discussion of an article from a newspaper can be a useful way to stimulate critical thinking.

Another question that often arises is whether the case method is a "Western" or "North American" or "capitalist" method that is not suitable to other cultures or historical experiences. The case method emphasizes individualism, the power of reason, the value of argument, the importance of self-expression, and the appropriateness of skepticism toward authority and expertise. In Asian countries, in contrast, the emphasis is on harmony, courtesy, discipline, respect for and deference to elders, loyalty, and order. In formerly Communist countries, there is little experience or perhaps even acceptance of critical questioning and assuming personal responsibility for solving problems; such conduct may be discouraged by senior authorities. Many cultures emphasize the superiority of principle, shared responsibility, and duty over reason and egoism as bases for social cohesion and progress.

As teachers or trainers, you must decide such questions for yourselves. In my view, the case method is appropriate whenever a teacher or trainer wishes to place emphasis on stimulating new ideas, encouraging creativity and independence of thought, encouraging people to assume leadership roles, and encouraging willingness to take risks and assume personal responsibility for achieving results. Where these skills and behaviors are not valued -- where the emphasis is on order, discipline, and the authority of expertise -- the case method may well be less appropriate than more traditional methods of teaching that emphasize the authority and expertise of the teacher.

Countries and cultures are becoming more interconnected with each passing decade. Countries operate in global markets. Information has few remaining national boundaries. Successful societies adapt to changes originating outside their borders. In this real world, the solutions to complex problems cannot be found in textbooks, nor will everyone agree on "the right answers" to difficult questions. The case method prepares students for a world in which, if they are to be effective, they must use critical thinking skills and the ability to create convincing arguments to succeed on behalf of themselves, their organizations, their communities, and their nations.

It will be helpful at this point to be more specific about what is meant by the term "case teaching."

What Is A Case?

A teaching case is a story describing, or based on, actual events, that justifies careful study and analysis by students. In other words, a teaching case is a story about the "real world" told with a definite teaching purpose in mind. A teaching case is a way of bringing the real world into a classroom so that students can "practice" on actual or realistic problems under the guidance of their teacher. By studying cases, students can begin to think and behave as practicing professionals in the roles they will assume after leaving the school or training program. The case method of teaching, then, is the set of approaches and "tricks of the trade" that successful case teachers use in the classroom to help their students learn by analyzing cases.

As will be discussed further below, a good teaching case contains no "right answer" to the problem, no "correct" way of thinking about or analyzing a situation. Rather, a teaching case provides the student with issues, problems, choices, and information and expects the student to come up with solutions and propose actions using the information in the case. A teaching case requires the student to answer the question: "What would you do if you faced the circumstances described in the case?"

Because it has no "approved solutions" to the problems it presents, a teaching case is distinctly different from the kinds of cases used in academic and other professional research. Research cases do have right answers. Such cases typically present correct approaches to problems, illustrate how a situation or issue should be approached, or describe how a problem was actually solved together with an evaluation of the solution. Research cases are not as useful in teaching critical thinking skills because the thinking has already been done, the answers already reached. Thus, a research case is more like a lecture: it presents "the truth" to students rather than challenging them to discover the truth on their own.

Teaching and Learning with Cases

How does case teaching differ from so-called "traditional" teaching?

Traditional teaching is based on the lecture. Knowledge is assumed to be the sole possession of the teacher, and, via the lecture, it flows one way: from teacher to student. The teacher's goal is student mastery of the teacher's truth, demonstrated primarily through examinations and “knowing the right answers” to questions. The teacher is the center of attention, always in control. Students are passive, compliant, obligated to be attentive.

In the “training variant” of traditional teaching, entry-level or experienced practitioners are trained in the “right way” to perform tasks, to exercise skills, or to solve complex problems. Practitioners/students are trained through exposure, imitation, and repetition to practice the correct methods and approaches.

Case teaching, in contrast, is discussion-based and experiential. The teaching case replaces the lecture as the vehicle for learning, and the case becomes the basis for discussion and exchange of ideas. The basic assumptions of case teaching are as follows:

* Though the case teacher knows more than the students, this knowledge is not regarded as definitive; students also have understanding and insight that can contribute to learning. Thus, both teacher and students assume responsibility for student learning; knowledge and ideas flow from teacher to student, from student to teacher, and from student to student. The goal is student competence and confidence in critical, analytical thinking and in the skills of argument and persuasion. Students are the centers of attention; the teacher is facilitator, sharing control with class participants without giving it up.

* The teacher's duty is to awaken student interest, to stimulate active engagement among students, and to encourage student contributions of ideas, analyses, and conclusions. The teacher is genuinely interested in student contributions.

* The students’ duty is to accept responsibility for their own learning, to prepare and contribute, to take the chance and express their own ideas. In other words, the students’ presence in the classroom makes a difference to what is learned.

* For both teachers and students, the case method is “more work but more fun.” There is a premium on skill in discussion, in dealing with unexpected statements or questions, in experimenting with ideas and solutions. The classroom experience is not “cut and dried." It is fluid and surprising; no two case discussions are alike, because the participants are not the same. This may be disconcerting at first to both teachers and students, because it may seem as if the discussion is out of control. Once expectations are adjusted to the assumptions underlying case teaching, however, case discussions become stimulating and rewarding.

A case discussion, then, is a learning situation. A case discussion is, in the words of one experienced case teacher, “a creative preoccupation of creative minds.” The leader shows

the path, and motivates students to move along it, generally from specific facts and details to general insights and conclusions. Planning and organization of the discussion are essential to the effectiveness of case teaching.

For the teacher, preparing for the case discussion means:

* Mastering the facts, issues, calculations and other material in the case;

* Anticipating questions that might arise, issues that are raised by the case, the kinds of arguments that might take place (anticipating becomes much easier with experience);

* Visualizing how you want the discussion to progress and where you want it to end up; and either studying a teaching note (a plan for using the case) that accompanies the case or, if it does not exist, preparing one.

For a student, preparing for the case discussion means answering the following general questions (in addition to specific questions assigned by the teacher):

* Who is the decision maker in the case? What decision is to be made?

* What are the decision maker's objectives?

* Are there other important actors? What are their objectives?

* What are the key issues, i.e., questions which must be addressed or points which must be resolved in order to reach a decision?

* What is the environment in which the decision is to be reached, i.e., specific constraints and opportunities affecting the decision?

* What specific alternative actions can the decision maker take? With what consequences?

* What would I do? Why?

The use of a case in teaching is usually organized according to the following outline:

* Student reading/preparation using assignment questions distributed in advance;

* Small group discussions among students to prepare for the actual case discussion;

* The "plenary session" or actual case discussion, presided over by the teacher; and

* Reaching conclusions or closure, either at the conclusion of the discussion or in the form of a written assignment.

For both students and teachers, preparing for a case discussion means mental preparation: for the unexpected question, for the need to think under pressure, and for listening to, respecting, and learning from others' views.

In my 20 years' experience as a case teacher, I have composed the following:

Vital Signs of a Good Case Discussion

* How much talking did the instructor do vs. how much talking did students do?

* How many students were voluntarily active in the discussion?

* How many questions did the instructor ask? How many follow-up or challenging questions were asked?

* How energetic was the instructor, i.e., how far did the instructor "travel" around the classroom?

* What was the level of "energy" in the discussion?

* How many "high points" were there, i.e., moments when everyone was engaged, interested, and focused on an issue?

* How many times did students laugh?

* Did the discussion make sense? Was it coherent?

* Did the discussion conclude on an upbeat?

Courses and Cases: Planning Your Curriculum

Case teaching takes place within the context of courses, workshops, or programs. Thus, the first step in curriculum planning is addressing the strategic questions: the explicit identification of your purposes and objectives; how you want to enhance the abilities of your students.

The next step is creating an inventory of resources available to you as a teacher: the amount of time you and your students can devote to the course; the physical arrangements, including size and layout of the classroom, availability of discussion rooms, library resources, audiovisual equipment, and the like; student qualifications, i.e., how well prepared they are for your course in terms of experience, prior courses,

familiarity with the topic, and the like; learning materials available to you and your students, including cases, word processors, computers, reference materials, and the like.

Once you have the general shape of a curriculum you will begin choosing cases for particular classes. A number of considerations will affect your choices. You will want to identify (or write) cases that are appropriate to your purposes and objectives; of high quality in terms of expression, clarity, and intellectual demands; accompanied by a teaching note (if you are choosing cases from a case distribution service); within your substantive/pedagogical competence (especially important with more experienced students), i.e., you have at least adequate substantive competence with the material; fits the time available and the physical arrangements (avoid cases that are too long or complicated for the time available); and likely to be interesting to students and to stimulate lively discussion and engagement. If you are choosing several cases, you will want to insure sufficient variety of format and changes of pace to stimulate student interest.

Cases that prove to be the most effective, in general, have what I have termed "star quality:"

The Star Quality Case

* Poses a problem that has no obvious right answer;

* Identifies actor(s) who must solve the problem, make decisions;

* Requires the reader to use the information in the case to address the problem;

* Evaluating the problem or potential solutions requires the reader to think critically and analytically; and

* Has enough information for a good analysis.

A check list for a star quality case is as follows:

* Is a decision maker who must act, choose, or make decisions clearly identified?

* What is the actor's job/role/position? Why must the actor take action? What kind of action must be taken? When is action necessary? What is the urgency?

* Is the time frame or chronology of the case clear? Can a time line or sequence of events be constructed from the facts in the case?

* Is it important to know where important events occur? Are places/locations clearly identified? Are maps and place descriptions clear and appropriate? Where is the actor when the action is required?

* Can the key problems, issues, or difficulties that the decision maker must or should confront be identified? How much intellectual effort or deciphering is needed?

* Is it within the capabilities of the students, or will they be frustrated?

* Can information available to or needed by the decision maker be identified in the case? Is there extraneous information? If so, does its presence serve a useful purpose? Is the relevance of information obvious or are analysis and judgment needed?

* Is the case organized according to a logical, easy to understand outline? Are there subheads, numbered points, transitions, clear and well labeled tables, well-organized appendices, well-reproduced charts and graphics?

* Is the case interesting and challenging? Does the case introduction arouse interest or curiosity? Is the problem or issue introduced clearly? Does the reader of the case want to keep reading?

* Will case readers be able to see themselves in the decision maker's role or in other roles? Are readers likely to have different opinions as to appropriate action? Will they sympathize or identify with the actor's problems? Can a relevant range of alternative courses of action be identified using information in the case?

Writing Your Own Case: The Basics

Teaching cases covering a wide variety of subjects are available from several sources, including the Harvard Business School, the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank, and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government , and on the World Wide Web from, for example, the Electronic Hallway at http://www.hallway.org. You may nonetheless decide that, to meet your teaching goals, you must write your own case.

Writing a teaching case involves the following steps:

* Preparing a case prospectus;

* Conducting research necessary to writing the case;

* Writing drafts of the case;

* Seeking critical review of case drafts from knowledgeable people;

* Editing and revising the draft until it is ready for use in teaching;

* Preparing a teaching note to accompany the case;

* Use of the case and further revision as needed; and

* Publication or distribution of the case through an appropriate channel.

The initial step, preparation of a case prospectus, generally conforms to the following outline:

* Subject/topic/dimensions

* Audience/pre-requisites

* Teaching purposes/objectives

* The story/abstract

* Case content

* Setting: where, when, why

* Decision maker/main actor/other actors

* Issues/problems/interests

* Constraints/opportunities

* Decision/action

* Sources of information, data

* Research plan

* Foreseeable difficulties

Research for a teaching case typically involves, first, a search of secondary sources, such as published reports, press accounts, academic research, or other background documents and materials. Next, based on this background preparation, the case writer embarks on primary research: interviews with key actors and experts, personal observation of settings and activities, analysis of administrative records, data, or other facts; preparation of charts, tables, maps, time lines, or other materials to be used in analysis. Finally, the results of the research effort are organized in such a way as to facilitate preparation of an outline for the actual writing of the first draft of the case.

Primary research, and, in particular, identifying, contacting, and interviewing key informants and other sources of information, is an all-important step. In the case writing workshop, special considerations associated with the following topics are covered:

* Contacts and access: are key informants available to talk to you?

* The interview process: how can you most effectively elicit the information you are seeking?

* Identifying additional sources: can interview subjects identify other sources of information or people to talk to?

* Follow-up: have you left open the possibility of checking facts and quotations with your interview subjects or returning to the scene of action?

The successful case writer is, above all, resourceful. Case research resembles the investigative activities of good journalists much more than the straightforward methods of academic research. Be mindful of the following:

Tips for the Intrepid Case Writer

* Be curious. Ask, Why? Identify choices, conflicts, rejected alternatives.

* Bring actors alive. Show them whole, as real people, interesting, complex.

* Be skeptical. Do not take a story at face value. Do not believe it the first time. Seek multiple sources, corroboration. Seek multiple perspectives, unpopular views, “unofficial” interpretations, maverick opinions.

* Follow your hunches, intuitions, instincts. You may be on to something.

* Collect scraps of information, gossip, attitudes, body language, side remarks, visual clues, local color.

* Suspend your own judgment as long as possible. Don’t prejudge or rule out possibilities you don't favor.

A good teaching case is a piece of original research. Even participants in the events described in the case, most of whom have only limited experience with the overall situation, should learn something from reading it.

Can Anyone Be A Case Teacher?

Many teachers and trainers mistakenly assume that, to be a successful case teacher, you must have flair and charisma, that you must be an actor and an extrovert. While it is

helpful to feel comfortable exchanging ideas with students and having a feel for discussion leadership, effective case teaching is more a matter of underlying values than of personality. To be successful in teaching with cases, you must be genuinely interested in what your students think, must be willing to share your authority in the classroom with your students, and must be convinced that students will learn more when they are active participants in the learning experience than when they are merely passive. When your students see that you, as their teacher, have respect for them, they are more likely, as professionals, to have respect for what others can teach them. This, after all, is the mark of an effective leader and practitioner.