



Kennedy School of Government Case Program

Using a Teaching Case

This is meant to be a "shorthand" guide on how to use the teaching cases posted on this web site (<http://www.ksgcase.harvard.edu>).

What is a teaching case?

Teaching cases—also known as case studies—are narratives designed to serve as the basis for classroom discussion. Cases don't offer their own analysis. Instead, they are meant to test the ability of students to apply the theory they've learned to a "real-world" situation. Although teaching cases originated in professional education—business, medicine, law, and public administration—they can be used in any course where good accounts of specific events can help exemplify and illuminate theory.

How does the case method differ from a lecture approach?

Case teaching is both more interactive and more indirect. The method is based in the belief, as the Harvard Business School once put it, that "wisdom can't be told." In other words, although some material is best presented through lecture, learning can also take place and be reinforced through a discussion which forces students to reach their own conclusions about the narratives they read. This approach is often called discussion-based learning.

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Do cases have “answers”?

Cases are not the same as exercises or problems. They present ambiguous situations in which protagonists face difficult questions. A good case teacher aims to shape a discussion in which there is a high quality of analysis—not a single right answer. This is not to say that one observation in a case discussion is as good as another, however.

How should one choose a case?

Typically, case teachers look for cases that describe situations that can be related to assigned theory-based readings. Thus, if one were teaching a political science course in which there were readings about the preconditions for successful policy initiatives, one might assign a case in which there was an effort to initiate new policy. Discussion could then focus on whether the appropriate preconditions were present and whether the case protagonist took full advantage of them.

How should one prepare to teach a case?

The instructor does play a fundamentally different role in leading a case-based class than in lecturing. Rather than reading from notes or reciting from memory, your job, instead, is to stimulate a structured discussion by asking questions. Thus, one should prepare by devising a good first question which will elicit, if possible, various points of view. One should strive to imagine the probable course of the discussion based on the likely answers to that first question. This, in turn, leads to a formulation of the subsequent stages of the discussion.

For example, take the one-page case *Plastic in the Public Sector* (#784.0; http://www.ksgcase.harvard.edu/pdf/784_0.pdf), in which a state bureaucracy encounters difficulty in convincing a central state authority to allow it to adopt an innovation (use of credit cards for the payment of park fees). Discussion might begin with the question: Why is there resistance to the proposed change? The responses might lead to discussion of the nature of bureaucracy—particularly good if, for instance, the instructor had assigned James Q. Wilson’s book of the same name. But, after a few minutes of such discussion, the instructor might turn the conversation in a different direction and ask whether parks officials had actually advanced a good argument for change? This, in turn, can lead to discussion of what form such an argument might have taken. Finally, the discussion might turn to the question of where, in an organization, the responsibility for innovation lies. In this discussion, there will be a range of points of view expressed. But by focusing on the right questions, the instructor can be sure that the topics he or she thinks are important will be the ones the class confronts.

Should the instructor provide an opinion?

One does not want to give the impression that the case discussion is nothing but an extended “hide the ball” exercise, in which the instructor encourages a lot of heat only to reveal, in the end, that he or she is the true source of light. But many instructors do close case discussions with their own wrap-up, in which they summarize key insights and highlight what they believe to have been the key insights proffered.

Cases do not, by any means, serve all teaching purposes. But they can be a powerful tool for engaging students and finding out whether they have mastered material to the point that they can apply it.