

TWENTY STRATEGIES FOR FACILITATING CASE DISCUSSIONS AND ENGAGING STUDENTS

**Mary R. Sudzina
University of Dayton
DAYTON, OHIO, U.S.A.**

Abstract

There is no one “right way” to teach with case studies. There are, however, a variety of interactive case study strategies that have been applied effectively across content areas and disciplines. Highlights include: the introduction of a proven 5-step process for case analysis; 20 techniques for facilitating case discussions and engaging students; and, a video of a case discussion in action, in which those 20 techniques are modeled and demonstrated.

KEY WORDS: Case analysis, facilitating case discussions, interactive case methods

INTRODUCTION

The number of disciplines that are including problem-based learning (PBL) and case studies in their professional preparation is becoming increasingly widespread. By definition, PBL presents a rich problem that affords free inquiry by students. The learning is student-centered, active, collaborative, and often incorporates case studies [see, Evenson & Hmelo, 2000].

Case studies are “slices of life” that present real life dilemmas with multilayered issues and perspectives. Cases, which may be one page or 100 pages, are applicable to a variety of content areas, and offer no one “right” answer. However, effective responses are practical, rooted in the literature or research, and take into consideration all aspects of the problem. Hence, responses are dynamic and synergetic in nature.

Traditional instruction, by contrast, is teacher-centered and teacher-directed. The instructor selects and delivers the content, (usually in a lecture format), and evaluates students on their ability to reproduce that content on an exam. Students usually play a passive role in their learning. There usually is one particular answer that is acceptable on an exam.

Instructional leaders, trained in the traditional lecture method, often struggle with how to incorporate PBL and cases into their curricula, facilitate case discussions, and assess student outcomes with cases. This increased level of interactivity and engagement may be initially challenging for faculty and students alike.

There is no one “right way” to teach with case studies. There are, however, a variety of interactive case study strategies that have been applied effectively across content areas and disciplines [see, Sudzina, 1997; 1999; Sudzina, 2000].

This paper provides an introduction to a proven 5-step process for case analysis, and outlines 20 strategies for facilitating case discussions and engaging students. Additionally, a videotape of case discussion in progress, in which those techniques are demonstrated and modeled by the author, will be reviewed.

A FIVE-STEP PROCESS FOR CASE ANALYSIS

There are many things to consider when beginning teaching with case studies. These include: course content to be addressed; classroom setting and time constraints; student considerations; case study sources; case selection; teaching strategies and assignments; and, assessment strategies. For a fuller explanation of each of these areas and case resources, see "Guidelines for Teaching with Cases" (Sudzina, 1999, pp. 8-19).

Once the decision has been made on the content to be addressed, the case to be used, and the resulting assignments, it is critical to introduce students to a conceptual framework for case analysis. Such a framework serves as a template to guide students in their problem solving and to prepare them for case study discussions. One framework that has been found to be effective across content areas, and at the undergraduate, graduate, and in-service levels of instruction is the five-step process of McNergney, Herbert, and Ford (see, Table 1).

TABLE 1

❖ A five-step process for case analysis, based on the work of John Dewey

1. Identifying the issues and facts in a case
2. Identifying the differing perspectives and values
3. Identifying professional knowledge
4. Formulating and prioritizing actions, both short-term and long-term
5. Considering the consequences of such, actions, both positively and negatively

(McNergney, Herbert, & Ford, 1994)

This process for case analysis, based on the work of John Dewey, can also be used to assess the thoroughness and effectiveness of students' case analyses and discussions.

TWENTY TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING WITH CASE STUDIES

TEACHING STRATEGIES

The heart and soul of case analysis is the case discussion. There are many teaching techniques that have been found to be effective when leading case discussions (see, Table 2). While these pedagogical strategies are not new, when used in concert with case content and analysis, they bring a high level of student interactivity and engagement to case discussions. These techniques can be used in any teaching situation in which instructor-student interactivity is desired.

TABLE 2

❖ Twenty techniques for facilitating case discussions

- Setting the agenda
- Interviewing
- Follow up
- Role playing
- Probing
- Elaboration
- Asking for information
- Devil's Advocate inquiry

- Open-ended questioning
- Active listening
- Alternative perspective
- Drawing out students
- Clarification
- Reinforcing appropriate use of resources
- Polling
- Redirecting
- Compare and contrast
- Positive feedback
- Summarizing
- Closure

(Sudzina, 2004)

While many of these techniques need little explanation, an example of how each can be used in case discussions may be helpful:

Setting the agenda – outlining the plan and expectations for the case discussion

Interviewing – asking a student what he/she personally thinks about a certain issue and why

Follow-up – asking for more clarification; i.e., the consequences of a proposed action

Role-play – assigning, or having students volunteer, to assume the values, perspectives, motivations, and emotions of one of the characters in the case; to become that character

Probing – asking for more information or explanation

Elaboration – having students give a fuller explanation of the facts or issues

Asking for information – uncovering overlooked facts, details, or research; i.e., “What’s missing from this discussion of the issues?”

Devil’s Advocate inquiry – challenging students to disagree with and/or question a course of action that seems plausible, but may not be appropriate in this case situation

Open-ended questioning – asking students’ opinions in order to jump-start the discussion

Active listening – rephrasing a student response; i.e., “If I heard you correctly, you said...”

Alternative perspective – asking for the opposite or different perspective than the one just given

Drawing out students – calling on students who tend not to participate and asking them to comment. This is particularly effective for moving the discussion around the room.

Clarification – asking for additional information to make clear a student’s point of view

Reinforcing appropriate use of resources – giving positive feedback for the use of research or professional sources

Polling – through a show of hands, asking who agrees or disagrees with the last comment

Redirecting – calling on a student in another part of the room to comment on the last statement; focusing attention in another part of the room

Compare and contrast – focusing attention on how a this situation/solution is alike and different from others students have encountered

Positive feedback – reinforcing student responses through specific, supportive feedback

Summarizing – asking students to capture, in their own words, what major points were gleaned from the case discussion

Closure – bringing the conversation full-circle by reiterating the goals of the discussion (i.e., setting the agenda) and reinforcing the lessons learned, particularly with the applications of theory and research to practice

CASE STUDY VIDEO

An effective follow-up to the introduction of a 5-step process for case analysis, and 20 techniques for teaching with case studies, is viewing the videotape, *Teaching and Learning with Case Studies: Facilitating Case Discussions and Engaging Students* (Sudzina, 2004). This 29-minute professional development video, written and produced by the author, introduces participants to a clip from the video

case study, "What To Do About Raymond" from the video series, *Becoming a Star Teacher* (Rowley & Hart, 1995).

The case is about a seventh grade student who falls asleep in class and fails to complete his assignments. The case ends with Raymond being suspended for cutting another's teacher's class. This multilayered case highlights issues such as communication, behavior management, engaging students in relevant material, extra credit, parental involvement, and suspension.

The class featured in the video is a sophomore level educational psychology class. All students have given their permission to appear in the video. The students have been introduced to the case study method and have seen the video case. They have been assigned to teams of 4 students each and have completed a written analysis of the case to bring to class in preparation for the case discussion. The discussion that takes place is spontaneous and unrehearsed. Over an hour and a half of case discussion has been edited to 25 minutes in the video.

Briefly, the video opens with Dr. Sudzina giving the class a short synopsis of the case and setting the agenda for the case discussion. Excerpts from the "Raymond" case are shown. Dr. Sudzina then facilitates the case discussion using a 5-step process based on the work of John Dewey. As she draws out the issues, perspectives, knowledge, actions, and consequences of the case, notations appear in the left hand corner of the video screen identifying the strategies used in the case discussion. Strategies such as probing, redirecting, role-playing, and Devil's Advocate questioning are illustrated. The video concludes with a short summary of the benefits of using case studies that include improving student competence, problem-solving abilities, and professionalism. Resources and references are listed at the end of the tape.

Both faculty and students have been shown this video as a professional development tool. Both groups report that one of their favorite aspects of the video is seeing a case discussion in action, especially the role-play. Viewing the case discussion, with each technique labeled and modeled, raises viewers' awareness and confidence in applying these techniques to their own teaching and/or case analysis.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Teaching with case studies is more than the sum of its parts. Just as there is often no one "right" answer in case analysis, so too, there is no one "right" way to teach with case studies. This paper is intended to spark and inspire instructional leaders' interest in teaching with cases and to suggest teaching techniques to help deliver content in a highly contextual, interactive format. Participants were exposed to: the possibilities and benefits of using case studies in their courses; a 5-step conceptual framework for case analysis; and, examples of twenty pedagogical techniques that can be used to facilitate case discussions.

Using a variety of techniques to deliver content is considered best practice and contributes to the professional development of the instructor and student alike. Applying case studies to course content is an effective vehicle to engage students in higher-order thinking as they make the connections between theory and research to real life dilemmas in their areas of concentration.

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