

Using Case Studies for Character Development

What are case studies?

Case studies are stories. They present realistic, complex, and contextually rich situations and often involve a dilemma, conflict, or problem that one or more of the characters in the case must negotiate.

A good case study, according to Professor Paul Lawrence is “the vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and the instructor. A good case keeps the class discussion grounded upon some of the stubborn facts that must be faced in real life situations.” (quoted in Christensen, 1981)

As an instructional strategy, case studies “bridge the gap between theory and practice and between the academy and the workplace” (Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005, p.182). They also give students practice identifying the parameters of a problem, recognizing and articulating positions, evaluating courses of action, and arguing different points of view.

Case studies vary in length and detail, and can be used in a number of ways depending on the case itself and on the instructor’s goals.

- They can be real or simply realistic, written or video.
- They can provide all the relevant data students need to discuss and resolve the central issue, or only some of it, requiring students to identify, and possibly fill in the missing information.
- They can require students to propose a solution for the case or simply to identify the parameters of the problem.

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It is important to know all the issues involved in the case, prepare questions and prompts in advance, and anticipate where students might have questions or issues. Finally, consider who your students are and how you might productively draw on their backgrounds, experiences, personalities, etc., to enhance the discussion.

While there are many variations in how case studies can be used, these six steps provide a general framework for how to lead a case-based discussion:

1. Give students ample time to read or watch and think about the case.
2. Introduce the case briefly and provide some guidelines for how to approach it. Clarify how you want students to think about the case. Break down the steps you want students to take in analyzing the case (e.g., “First, identify the constraints each character in the case was operating under and the opportunities s/he had. Second, evaluate the decisions each character made and their implications. Finally, explain what you would have done differently and why.”). If you would like students to disregard or focus on certain information, specify that as well (e.g., “I want you to ignore the political affiliation of the characters described and simply distinguish their positions on stem-cell research as they are articulated here.”)
3. Create groups and monitor them to make sure everyone is involved. Breaking the full class into smaller groups gives individual students more opportunities for participation and interaction. However, small groups can drift off track if you do not provide structure. Thus, it is a good idea to make the task of the group very concrete and clear (e.g., “You are to identify three potential



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courses of action and outline the pros and cons of each from a public relations standpoint”). You may also want to designate roles within each group: for example, one individual might be charged with keeping the others on task and watching the time; a second individual’s role might be to question the assumptions or interpretations of the group and probe for deeper analysis; a third individual’s role might be to record the group’s thoughts and report their decision to the class. Alternatively, group members could be assigned broad perspectives (e.g., liberal, conservative, libertarian) to represent, or asked to speak for the various “stake-holders” in the case study.

4. Have groups present their solutions or reasoning. If groups know they are responsible for producing something (a decision, rationale, analysis) to present to the class, they will approach the discussion with greater focus and seriousness. Write their conclusions on the board so that you can return to them in the discussion that follows.
5. Ask questions for clarification and to move discussion to another level. One of the challenges for a case-based discussion leader is to guide the discussion and probe for deeper analysis without over-directing. As the discussion unfolds, ask questions that call for students to examine their own assumptions, substantiate their claims, provide illustrations, etc.
6. Be sure to bring the various strands of the discussion back together at the end, so that students see what they have learned and take those lessons with them.

Sources

Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, Carnegie Mellon University Web Site

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