

Teaching Strategies for Case-Based Learning

By bringing real world problems into student learning, cases invite active participation and innovative solutions to problems as they work together to reach a judgment, decision, recommendation, prediction or other concrete outcome.

The Campus Instructional Consulting unit at Indiana University has created a great resource for case-based learning. The following is from their website which we have permission to use.

Formats for Cases

- **“Finished” cases based on facts**—for analysis only, since the solution is indicated or alternate solutions are suggested.
- **“Unfinished” open-ended cases**, where the results are not yet clear (either because the case has not come to a factual conclusion in real life, or because the instructor has eliminated the final facts.) Students must predict, make choices and offer suggestions that will affect the outcome.
- **Fictional cases** entirely written by the instructor—can be open-ended or finished. Cautionary note: the case must be both complex enough to mimic reality, yet not have so many “red herrings” as to obscure the goal of the exercise.
- **Original documents**—news articles, reports with data and statistics, summaries, excerpts from historical writings, artifacts, literary passages, video and audio recordings, ethnographies, etc. With the right questions, these can become problem-solving opportunities. Comparison between two original documents related to the same topic or theme is a strong strategy for encouraging both analysis and synthesis. This gives the opportunity for presenting more than one side of an argument, making the conflicts more complex.

Managing a Case Assignment

- Design discussions for small groups: 3-6 students are an ideal group size for setting up a discussion on a case.
- Design the narrative or situation such that it requires participants to reach a judgment, decision, recommendation, prediction or other concrete outcome. If possible, require each group to reach a consensus on the decision requested.
- Structure the discussion. The instructor should provide a series of written questions to guide small group discussion. Pay careful attention to the sequencing of the questions. Early questions might ask participants to make observations about the facts of the case. Later questions could ask for comparisons, contrasts, and analyses of competing observations or hypotheses. Final questions might ask students to take a position on the matter. The purpose of these questions is to stimulate, guide or prod (but not dictate) participants’ observations and analyses. The questions should be impossible to answer with a simple yes or no.

- Debrief the discussion to compare group responses. Help the whole class interpret and understand the implications of their solutions.
- Allow groups to work without instructor interference. The instructor must be comfortable with ambiguity and with adopting the non-traditional roles of witness and resource, rather than authority.

Designing Case Study Questions

Cases can be more or less “directed” by the kinds of questions asked—these kinds of questions can be appended to any case, or could be a handout for participants unfamiliar with case studies on how to approach one.

- What is the situation—what do you actually know about it from reading the case? (Distinguishes between fact and assumptions under critical understanding)
- What issues are at stake? (Opportunity for linking to theoretical readings)
- What questions do you have—what information do you still need? Where/how could you find it?
- What problem(s) need to be solved? (Opportunity to discuss communication versus conflict, gaps between assumptions, sides of the argument)
- What are all the possible options? What are the pros/cons of each option?
- What are the underlying assumptions for [person X] in the case—where do you see them?
- What criteria should you use when choosing an option? What does that mean about your assumptions?

Managing Discussion and Debate Effectively

- **Delay the problem-solving part** until the rest of the discussion has had time to develop. Start with expository questions to clarify the facts, then move to analysis, and finally to evaluation, judgment, and recommendations.
- **Shift points of view:** “Now that we’ve seen it from [W’s] standpoint, what’s happening here from [Y’s] standpoint?” What evidence would support Y’s position? What are the dynamics between the two positions?
- **Shift levels of abstraction:** if the answer to the question above is “It’s just a bad situation for her,” quotations help: When [Y] says “_____,” what are her assumptions? Or seek more concrete explanations: Why does she hold this point of view?”
- **Ask for benefits/disadvantages of a position;** for all sides.
- **Shift time frame**—not just to “What’s next?” but also to “How could this situation have been different?” What could have been done earlier to head off this conflict and turn it into a productive conversation? Is it too late to fix this? What are possible leverage points for a more productive discussion? What good can come of the existing situation?
- **Shift to another context:** We see how a person who thinks X would see the situation. How would a person who thinks Y see it? We see what happened in the Johannesburg news, how could this be handled in [your town/province]? How might [insert person, organization] address this problem?

- **Follow-up questions:** “What do you mean by ___?” Or, “Could you clarify what you said about ___?” (even if it was a pretty clear statement—this gives students time for thinking, developing different views, and exploration in more depth). Or “How would you square that observation with what [name of person] pointed out?”
- **Point out and acknowledge differences in discussion**—“that’s an interesting difference from what Sam just said, Sarah. Let’s look at where the differences lie.” (let sides clarify their points before moving on).