What are case studies?

Case studies are stories or scenarios, often in narrative form, created and used as a tool for analysis and discussion. They have long been used in higher education, particularly in business and law.

Cases are often based on actual events, which adds a sense of urgency or reality. Case studies have elements of Simulations, although the students tend to be observers rather than participants.

Why use case study?

Case studies are effective ways to get students to practically apply their skills, and their understanding of learned facts, to a real-world situation. They are particularly useful where situations are complex and solutions are uncertain.

They can serve as the launching pad for a class discussion, or as a project for individuals or small groups. A single case may be presented to several groups, with each group offering its solutions.

Used as a teaching tool, a case study

- engages students in research and reflective discussion
- encourages higher order thinking
- facilitates creative problem solving
- allows students to develop realistic solutions to complex problems
- develops students' ability to identify and distinguish between critical and extraneous factors
- enables students to apply previously acquired skills
- creates an opportunity for students to learn from one another.

Case studies bridge the gap between a more teacher-centred Lecture method and pure problem-based learning. They leave room for teachers to give direct guidance, and the scenarios themselves provide hints and parameters within which the students must operate.
Common issues using case studies

The challenges with case studies are similar to those with Discussions:

- getting students to talk, and keeping the class moving,
- pointless arguments, which can throw a case analysis off track.

Since case study analysis is student-led, it can be difficult to get the class to move through various stages of analysis and arrive at a reasonable conclusion.

How to teach effectively with case studies

Case content should usually reflect the purposes of the course, and should align with the course learning outcomes, other teaching strategies and assessment in your course or program.

1) Use complex cases requiring multiple perspectives

A good case has sufficient detail to:

- necessitate research and
- stimulate analysis from a variety of viewpoints or perspectives.

It places the learner in the position of problem solver. Students actively engage with the materials, discovering underlying issues, dilemmas and conflict issues.

2) Assess the process of analysis, not only the outcome

The resolution of a case is only the last stage of a process. You can observe or evaluate:

- quality of research
- structural issues in written material
- organisation of arguments
- the feasibility of solutions presented
- intra-group dynamics
- evidence of consideration of all case factors.

Case studies may be resolved in more than one manner.

3) Use a variety of questions in case analysis
Various ways to use questions in teaching are discussed in detail on the Questioning page. If you are using the Harvard Business School Case Method, when analysing case studies, use a range of question types to enable the class to move through the stages of analysis:

- clarification / information seeking (what?)
- analysis / diagnosis (why?)
- conclusion / recommendation (what now?)
- implementation (how?) and
- application / reflection (so what? what does it mean to you?)

Further resources

- For help using media to create case studies, see Creative Development and Educational Media Production.
- UNSW Assessment Toolkit: Assessment by Case Studies and Scenarios
- External sources:
  - Participant-Centred Learning and Case Method (Harvard Business School).