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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Incorporating the Case Method in the Classroom

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Incorporating the Case Method in the Classroom

by Peter Eubanks

Often evoking images of law or business students in a competitive classroom environment, the case method can actually be an effective and collaborative pedagogical tool in a variety of teaching-and-learning settings.

Officially created at Harvard Law School in 1871 (though already in use by the Medical Society of New Haven as early as 1788) and expanded to Harvard Business School beginning in 1921 ([read more on the history here](#)), the case method today is in use in a variety of academic fields, [including biology, chemistry, nursing, psychology, education, foreign languages, journalism, public policy, public health, sustainable development, ethics](#), and just about any other field of study that you can imagine.

So what is the case method, and why might you consider using it in your classroom and other teaching-and-learning settings?

While there is no one, single definition of the case method, one Swedish scholar has recently described it as “[an intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unit, which is aimed to generalize over several units](#),” and two Canadian scholars have explained that the case method is an “[intensive, systematic investigation of a single individual, group, community or some other unit in which the researcher examines in-depth data relating to several variables](#).”

In short, the case method is a way of teaching and learning about real and/or hypothetical situations and challenges and how individuals or groups have reacted (or might react) to them. It allows students to apply what they have learned to real-life (or simulated real-life) settings, using acquired knowledge and skills to solve realistic problems and assess their own mastery of a particular subject or skill set.

For example, a German professor might task students with [developing a marketing plan for air conditioners in eco-conscious Germany](#), a faculty member in media studies might have students evaluate [which video clips should be included in a particular documentary and where](#), or an instructor in public health might ask students [to consider the advisability of medical parole for elderly inmates](#). Because the case method always tells a story, it is also a method that appeals to the *homo narrans* in all of us, that intrinsic part of our human nature that seems hardwired to learn from and take joy in storytelling. (See [here](#) or [here](#) for the same article in two differently accessible formats containing a discussion of how storytelling is a key element of the human need for play, and

[here](#) for a Ted Talk about the science of storytelling and how it can be used to develop empathy and inspire action).

In [an article last year](#) in the *Harvard Business Review*, the former dean of the Harvard Business School, Nitin Nohria, notes seven skills that students develop as they learn via the case study method: preparation, discernment, bias recognition, judgment, collaboration, curiosity, and confidence. What faculty member wouldn't want to help their students develop these skills, so important in both professional and personal life? The case method can indeed be an effective tool for faculty members striving to prepare students for the world beyond our campus.

So how does a faculty member implement the case method in the classroom, especially if they feel they have limited experience in this area? And are there any drawbacks or limitations to incorporating this method in our teaching?

The most important thing to keep in mind is that the case method involves telling a story about a company, legal case, or other situation in which a protagonist faces a problem that must be resolved. So the first step is to create a story that is compelling and captivates the reader's interest. This story should include a description of the different perspectives of various other actors in the story, as well as enough details so that students can make an informed decision about the case. This story can be fictional or real (or a combination of the two); in general, the more authentic the case, the better. The [Case Consortium at Columbia University](#) provides a helpful database of case studies from various academic fields and can give you an idea of what kinds of different stories you might come up with.

The next step is to determine whether the ending of the story will be open or closed: Is this a description of something that has happened already, or something that is yet to happen? It can be fun to reveal to students at the end of a case unit what decision(s) the protagonist(s) in a particular case ended up making in real life, and what the results were. It can also be a good exercise for students to wrestle with an ongoing challenge or dilemma that is yet to be fully resolved.

Finally, one must decide whether this case will be interview-based or armchair-based (the former is generally preferable, but both can be effective). An interview-based case is simply one in which significant facts and details of a case come from a protagonist directly, whom the faculty member interviews in order to get relevant information for developing the case. The advantage of interviewing a protagonist (business owner, decision-maker, etc.) is that it allows students to put themselves in the position of an actual person and engage in a real-life decision process, which tends toward authenticity in learning. And "armchair" approach is one in which the faculty member must gather their own information from available resources, without direct contact with any of the protagonists or actors in a particular case. The advantage of a so-called "armchair" approach is that it can allow for flexibility and creativity both in the crafting of the case story and in the solutions proposed, since students will not necessarily be bound by the actual facts of a particular case.

Given how effective the case method has been in teaching generations of successful students throughout the world, the drawbacks are relatively minimal. The case method requires a lot of planning on the part of the faculty member, who must prepare in very detailed and/or creative ways, and it involves finding innovative ways to assess student learning. But the benefits of this method, as well as the sustainability of particular cases over years, make this effort worth it.

If you are interested in learning more specifics about how you might incorporate the case method in your own teaching, you are welcome to attend my workshop on Friday, Oct. 7, 2022, from 9:30-10:30 AM in SSC 3311 or on Zoom by [registering at this link](#). As a faculty associate in the Center for Faculty Innovation, I am also happy to [schedule a one-on-one consultation](#) about how you might effectively use the case method (or elements thereof) in your particular field or area of expertise.

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