



Case Studies: Connecting Theory to Practice

A case study is a scenario or problem written in the form of a story. It presents an issue relating to an event, activity, or problem, which students are asked to research, debate, and/or solve. Case studies offer a number of educational benefits, including forming connections between course content, real issues, and student experiences, motivating students, making interdisciplinary connections, strengthening student skills in analysis and critical thinking, and promoting active learning.



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What are Case Studies?

Case studies are issues or problems presented in story format. There are two main types of case studies: cases based on real events, and fictitious scenarios that are loosely based on everyday situations and typical events. They can be used in any discipline.

Why Use Case Studies?

Case studies offer the following educational advantages. They can:

- Place course content in a real-world context, making it more relevant and engaging.
- Have a student-centred focus, allowing students to relate personal experiences to the learning.
- Strengthen student skills in analysis and critical thinking.
- Involve multiple perspectives, allowing students to understand the different facets of an issue, and how a course of action can have a variety of impacts in a scenario.
- Enhance student learning of course content through problem solving.
- Allow students to investigate various aspects of an issue, facilitating deeper learning.
- Promote the development of communication skills when analyzed in a group setting.
- Be multidisciplinary, highlighting the complex nature of real-world issues.
- Involve ethical considerations.
- Increase interaction in a course.

How to Select Case Studies

Good case studies focus on one issue or problem, and have a clear problem statement. They include an open-ended question or problem that allows for multiple solutions. Choose case studies that match your course objectives, allowing students to apply what they learn in the course to the scenario. The case study should be succinct, well written, and well researched. It should challenge students in a thought-provoking manner. Engaging case studies tend to be controversial, prompting students to think about the ethical implications of various decisions or solutions. Many case studies have ambiguities and conflicting details, which require students to take a stance that will have both positive and negative implications.

When selecting case studies, look for scenarios that allow students to make interdisciplinary connections and relate to their own experiences. Good case studies are based on realistic situations that are meaningful to the students, and do not have clear cut ideal solutions. You may want to use case studies that include distractors, or pieces of information that are irrelevant to the case; this gives students practice at sorting out irrelevant details, which will always be present in the real world.

Give Me an Example

Set up the case study in a specific forum in the discussion board. Examining a case study in a group offers several advantages, including sharing ideas, insights, and experiences, and seeing other sides of an issue. When done on an asynchronous discussion board, students also have the opportunity to reflect and do research before responding.

- Select a case study that matches your curriculum objectives for the course, or write one if you can't find one that's appropriate.
- Set up a specific forum in the discussion board for the case study.
- Split students into groups to discuss the case if the class is large. Groups of about 10 should work well.
- Include the case and the initial discussion questions that students should address.
- Provide background resources for the case study, including supplementary readings and the necessary data to form an opinion about the case.
- Decide if you will ask students to do additional research as part of the case study.
- Give students guidelines about expectations for the assignment.
- Decide how you will evaluate student work.
- Facilitate the discussion by asking questions that will extend students' thinking in relation to the educational objectives.
- Consider having one or two students moderate the discussion, since this can lead to deeper learning.
- Think about whether or not you want students to complete an assignment after the group discussion, such as a summary of the issues, individual position paper, or research paper. If students are asked to make a decision, ask them to justify their position.

More Ideas

- There are a number of case study repositories available on the web for free if used for educational purposes.
- Have students write their own case studies. In order to construct a plausible case study, they will research facts, consider various angles of an issue, and have greater engagement in the course.
- Incorporate more than one case study in your class, so that students build on the skills they have already learned.

Other Considerations

- Case studies can be an effective teaching and learning technique for both face-to-face and online classes.
- In the process of answering the initial questions, students find other unanswered questions about the case.
- If the case study is about a real event, look for one set within the past 5 years.
- After the group discussion, consider how students will tie things together. You may have them construct a concept map, write a reflection paper, a position paper, a summary of the discussion, or do further research on some aspect of the case.
- Typically you will get more involvement if students know one another a bit, so avoid using case studies in the first couple weeks of classes.

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Where Can I Go for More Information?

1. Guidelines for Case Writing: Penn State Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence

<http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/pdf/CaseWritingGuidelines.pdf>

2. The National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science

A repository of science cases, as well as a portal site for other case study sites.

<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/ubcase.htm>

3. Penn State Teaching & Learning with Technology: Using Cases in Teaching

Includes examples by discipline.

<http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/cases/casewhat.html>

4. UK Centre for Materials Education: Teaching Materials Using Case Studies

An overview of case studies.

<http://www.materials.ac.uk/guides/casestudies.asp>