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Guiding Students to Think Critically Using Case Studies

📅 February 21, 2014 ✍️ [Laura Trujillo-Jenks, PhD](https://www.facultyfocus.com/author/laura-trujillo-jenks-phd/)



One of the best practices in teaching and learning is the use of a three-part case study, or a scenario-based story, to help students deepen their understanding of a concept. The three parts of a case study are a scenario-based story that focuses on a specific, hypothetical problem, supporting literature that aligns with the main themes of the story, and guiding questions that help the learner gain the most from understanding the concepts and objectives of the case study by applying critical and higher order thinking skills.

A scenario-based story is a situation, problem, or issue that is used to help students grasp the learning objectives of a lesson. For example, in an educational leadership law course that I teach, one day I might create an elaborate scenario that focuses on several problems and issues that also align with the lesson's objectives and concepts. Another day, the scenario could be a short one- to two-sentence story that is used at the beginning of class to engage students in reviewing key concepts and prepare them for the day's lesson, or at the end of a lesson to review what was discussed during class. Finally, I might present a scenario-based story through a video or news story. There are many great videos on YouTube and many great news stories all over the Internet that offer up scenarios that are easily accessible and provide a visual that may help stimulate learning.

Supporting literature that aligns with the main themes of the case study helps students focus on what is important. This literature can be the texts and supplemental material that are required for students to read for a course, or, for example, it can be state and federal codes that must be followed. Then, the guiding questions are created and used to help students think about the different outcomes that could occur and possibly prepare for confronting an issue in the real-world. These questions can be as elaborate or straightforward as needed.

Like a book study, a case study can provide the necessary platform for students to communicate and collaborate about a situation that concerns a certain group. They can be used to help a group of learners or others focus on a specific concept, or they can help those solve a problem. Additionally, they can be used to analyze a current practice, like an ineffective policy. Although case studies are not a new teaching method, they are a method that can be useful, providing an opportunity for



students to think outside the box. Through the use of a case study, students can actively engage in applying learned concepts, objectives, and knowledge to hypothetical situations by using critical and higher order thinking skills to answer tough questions.

Below are brief examples of the three types of case studies that I've used in my graduate course:

1. Elaborate Case Study: A high school senior is caught cheating on an exam. A passing grade on this exam is essential, since the exam grade will be applied to the senior's overall GPA. The teacher respects the student and counts the student as a favorite, especially since the student was accepted to attend Harvard. The teacher decides to ignore the policy and does not report the student's cheating, and allows the grade to be averaged with the student's GPA.

- What are the implications of the teacher not reporting the cheating?
- How would you have handled this situation differently?

2. One- to Two-Sentence Case Study: You are on campus late one night working on paperwork when you hear laughter and loud talking down the hall. As you approach the raucous, you enter a classroom to find three teachers and their spouses drinking beer.

- What do you do next and is your decision based on ethics or fear?

3. Video/News Story Case Study: Please view the assigned videos. As you watch them, keep in mind what you have learned about student speech and academic freedom.

- Are there any student speech or academic freedom issues?
- Has the student code of conduct been violated with these dances?

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