

# **Teaching Cases for Public Administration**

**Prepared by Andrew Graham,  
School of Policy Studies  
Queens University  
Kingston, Canada**

## Introduction

The case method is an established form of learning in many academic and professional learning contexts. However, its use varied dramatically with a strong focus on law, medicine and business historically. Its further applicability, especially in public administration, is now being realized. There are several reasons for that:

1. There is growth in the supply of public administration cases,
2. The case method is seen as a useful addition to the spectrum of teaching methodologies,
3. The case method inherently engages the student as an active participant in the learning process,
4. For those already in public administration, using cases draws upon their experience to embellish and enrich the case, and
5. The case method is now being recognized as a useful way to convey knowledge from one organization to another and from one generation to another.

Despite its apparent popularity, the case method remains open to concern, and case teaching is not as widespread as its effectiveness would suggest. This is so for two reasons. First, most of those who teach or train others have learned by traditional methods -- lectures, seminars, problem sets, and examinations . Second, because it is unfamiliar, the case method requires teachers and trainers to acquire new skills and attitudes towards teaching, a process which takes the kind of time and opportunity that many do not have because of their busy schedules. It also involves a changed relationship between the teacher and the student. In the case method, the student is challenged to take the analytical and decision lead. Theory and theoretical understanding come from either solving a problem or analyzing various options for action, not the other way around. The teacher becomes the guide in the process and not the source of the solution. For some, this is a challenge. For anyone, it involves a change in approach.

This Guidebook takes the approach that the case method in academic and professional learning is a useful and powerful tool. It is not, however, the only tool. Some academic institutions have adopted the case method as the primary means of teaching. This is unfortunate as learning takes place on many planes and in many ways. Successful results can only be achieved if there is a variety of methodologies in play, thereby ensuring that all students find the best way for themselves to learn. Similarly, some subject matter simply does require the use of traditional meanings of conveying such information. What the case does is bring theory to life.

Traditional teaching is based on the lecture. Knowledge is assumed to be the sole possession of the teacher, and, via the lecture, it flows one way: from teacher to student.

## Teaching Cases in the Academic Setting

Case teaching is discussion-based and experiential. The teaching case replaces the lecture as the vehicle for learning, and the case becomes the basis for discussion and exchange of ideas. However, in that regard, the appropriate vehicle for teaching the theoretical underpinnings must be found. Therefore, one often sees a case associated with a lecture or a set of readings. The challenge to the teacher is to ensure that the two are married together in the case discussion.

From a teaching and learning methodology perspective, various categories can be created that define the objectives of the case. This chart is a good way of organizing the objectives of teaching case studies.

### Teaching, Learning and Knowledge Transfer Case Categories

Case Category	Purpose	Outcome	Integrative
<b>Tools Cases: focusing on specific skills, issues or questions.</b>	Very structured and focused on applying specific skills or theories	Solution to problem or key lessons to be derived	Links single event or problem to skill or theory.
<b>Decision or Prospective Cases: focusing on resolving a real or fictional challenge, often with teamwork.</b>	Moderately structured with several pertinent factors that inter connect.	Reach a decision balancing factors applying variable analysis.	Balancing a number of variables with eye to costs and benefits of each potential course of action. The end result is unknown.
<b>Open-Ended Cases: multiple use, often describing complex, real-life situations. Sometimes as simulations.</b>	Unstructured in the sense that many variables are at play including context, culture and social elements.	Variable in that the first outcome is an appreciation of the situation wherein the variables are weighed, discounted or applied. Solutions may be complex, often involving a longer-term orientation.	Significant degree of integration of non-related variables.
<b>Meta Cases: very long, historical and analytical.</b>	Often complex and taking historical or longitudinal focus on specific problems in public administration, one policy area or public management problem.	Both in teaching and organizational learning, the outcome is an understanding of the problem or issue from a historical and contextual perspective.	Tool in knowledge transfer and also in providing an up-to-date state of play in complex public policy or administration area.

The basic assumptions of case teaching are as follows:

- Though the case teacher is more familiar with the material than the students, this knowledge is not regarded as definitive. Students also have understanding and insight that can contribute to learning. Thus, both teacher and students assume responsibility for student learning; knowledge and ideas flow from teacher to student, from student to teacher, and from student to student. The goal is student competence and confidence in critical, analytical thinking and in the skills of argument and persuasion.
- Students are the centers of attention; the teacher is facilitator, sharing control with class participants without giving it up.
- The teacher's duty is to awaken student interest, to stimulate active engagement among students, and to encourage student contributions of ideas, analyses, and conclusions.
- The students' duty is to accept responsibility for their own learning, to prepare and contribute, to take the chance and express their own ideas. In other words, the students' presence in the classroom makes a difference to what is learned.
- For both teachers and students, the case method is "more work but more fun."

There is a premium on skill in discussion, in dealing with unexpected statements or questions, in experimenting with ideas and solutions. The classroom experience is not "cut and dried." It is fluid and surprising; no two case discussions are alike, because the participants are not the same. This may be disconcerting at first to both teachers and students, because it may seem as if the discussion is out of control. Once expectations are adjusted to the assumptions underlying case teaching, however, case discussions become stimulating and rewarding.

A case discussion, then, is a learning situation. A case discussion is, in the words of one experienced case teacher, "a creative preoccupation of creative minds." The leader shows the path, and motivates students to move along it, generally from specific facts and details to general insights and conclusions. Planning and organization of the discussion are essential to the effectiveness of case teaching.

For the teacher, preparing for the case discussion means:

- Mastering the facts, issues, calculations and other material in the case;
- Anticipating questions that might arise, issues that are raised by the case, the kinds of arguments that might take place (anticipating becomes much easier with experience);
- Having a set of leading questions to ask should there be some hesitation at the outset or the conversation lags;

- Visualizing how you want the discussion to progress and where you want it to end up; and either studying a teaching note (a plan for using the case) that accompanies the case or, if it does not exist, preparing one.

For a student, preparing for the case discussion means answering the following general questions (in addition to specific questions assigned by the teacher):

- What is happening here?
- Who is the decision maker in the case? What decision is to be made?
- What are the decision maker's objectives?
- Are there other important actors? What are their objectives?
- What are the key issues, i.e., questions which must be addressed or points which must be resolved in order to reach a decision?
- What is the environment in which the decision is to be reached, i.e., specific constraints and opportunities affecting the decision?
- What specific alternative actions can the decision maker take? With what consequences?
- What would I do? Why?

The use of a case in teaching is usually organized according to the following outline:

- Student reading/preparation using assignment questions distributed in advance;
- Small group discussions among students to prepare for the actual case discussion;
- The "plenary session" or actual case discussion, presided over by the teacher; and
- Reaching conclusions or closure, either at the conclusion of the discussion or in the form of a written assignment.

For both students and teachers, preparing for a case discussion means mental preparation: for the unexpected question, for the need to think under pressure, and for listening to, respecting, and learning from others' views.

Instructors can create their own cases or can find cases that already exist. The following are some things to keep in mind when creating a case:

- What do you want students to learn from the discussion of the case?
- What do they already know that applies to the case?

- What are the issues that may be raised in discussion?
- How will the case and discussion be introduced?
- What preparation is expected of students? (Do they need to read the case ahead of time? Do research? Write anything?)
- What directions do you need to provide students regarding what they are supposed to do and accomplish?
- Do you need to divide students into groups or will they discuss as the whole class?
- Are you going to use role-playing or facilitators or record keepers? If so, how?
- What are the opening questions?
- How much time is needed for students to discuss the case?
- What concepts are to be applied/extracted during the discussion?
- How will you evaluate students?

### **Use of Case Studies to Develop Key Skills**

The case-based approach to learning has proven to be a useful method in developing transferable skills. Key skills that can be embedded into case studies include:

- **Group working.** The benefits of group working are well documented, and a team case study approach can add to the learning experience. Course group work has the added benefit of allowing students to share their personal knowledge and experiences. Care is needed with group working activities e.g. selecting group membership to ensure smooth group operation/training of students in group working skills. This is particularly important for longer case studies.
- **Individual study skills.** Case studies are a good vehicle for encouraging students to carry out independent research outside of the lecture/tutorial environment.
- **Information gathering and analysis.** Many case studies require resource investigation and encourage students to utilize a number of different sources, i.e. Internet, library, laboratory results and contacting experts.
- **Time management.** Longer case studies require students to really consider how best to carry out the work so that it is completed to the set deadline. Interim meetings with academic staff ensure progress is made during the case study rather than all the work being left to the last week.
- **Presentation skills.** Most case studies require students to present their work in a variety of formats, these include oral presentations, PowerPoint presentations, articles, posters and reports.

- **Practical skills.** Some case studies involve practical work on the components that are being studied.

## **Ways to Use Cases in the Classroom**

Case studies can be used in teaching in a variety of ways. The choice of teaching method is of course up to the individual instructor, based on the resources and time available, the nature of the class and the students and the subject of the case study in question.

It is important to note that, as the case study method of teaching traditionally requires considerable interpretation and discussion among students and between students and teacher, it is not often used for teaching by distance education. It is possible to use case studies in self-study programs, but this requires considerable planning and time on the part of the instructor, which in some respects is not in keeping with the independent nature of distance education work.

Following are some examples of teaching methods using case studies.

### **Class Discussion**

The case may be presented to students, either on the spot for immediate discussion, mirroring a real-life situation, or as preparatory work in advance of discussion in a later class. The discussion itself may take place among the entire class, or the class may be divided into small groups, each of which analyses the case and reports back to the larger group.

### **Role Play**

The case study may be presented either in whole or in part as a role play. For example, the students may be given 'parts' as people in the case and asked to present their 'character's' concerns and point of view. Discussion and analysis would proceed either through the role play or at the conclusion, as a class review.

### **Interviews**

The students may only be presented with part of the information and be required to ask particular questions to extract the rest of the data needed and provide their analysis and recommendations. The instructor or other students may serve as 'actors' to present the information and answer questions.

### **Assignments**

The case study may be presented as an assignment, with the student required to write an analysis and recommendations. This may be done as a take-home assignment or as part of an examination, requiring immediate response.

## **Using Cases for Organizational Learning or Knowledge Transfer**

While the notes above clearly apply in virtually any organized class setting, be it academic or in the professional learning context, cases which are based on real situation present unique opportunities and challenges. The objectives may vary somewhat. For instance, the objective of a real-life case is to identify lessons learned from the experience. This can be done through the documentation of the case itself as these may have been reported in some form of evaluation. However, the teacher will also want to embellish this with the observations and contributions of the participants. In other words, while there may be obvious formal lessons learned, what are the lessons that the participants in the specific learning situation have observed. A further challenges in real-life cases is to find the bridge between that experience – the case – and the experience of the participants, focusing on such questions as,

1. What are the key lessons of this case that may have some application in your work environment?
2. Can this situation or challenge happen to you?
3. Do you see yourself in this situation or one like it?
4. Were there successful practices in this case that you do not follow now but that might be of use to you?

### **Signs of a Good Case Discussion**

- How much talking did the instructor do vs. how much talking did students do?
- How many students were voluntarily active in the discussion?
- How many questions did the instructor ask? How many follow-up or challenging questions were asked?
- How energetic was the instructor, i.e., how far did the instructor “travel” around the classroom?
- What was the level of “energy” in the discussion?
- How many “high points” were there, i.e., moments when everyone was engaged, interested, and focused on an issue?
- How many times did students laugh?
- Did the discussion make sense? Was it coherent?
- Did the discussion conclude on an upbeat?

### **Preparing Students to Use Cases**

Case studies and their use in a learning environment demand that students act differently:

- They become active participants in the process, not simply receiving information,



- They will probably have to work with others, although this is not always the situation, as case analysis can be assigned on an individual basis or even used as a written assignment.
- Cases will often involve ambiguity or incomplete information. Therefore, students will have to exercise judgment about the missing elements.
- There is no one right answer in most cases, something that some students will find uncomfortable.
- They will be required to analyze situations and apply judgments to them.
- Based on the teach approach of the instructor, students may be required to make class presentations based on prior analysis or called upon to contribute to class discussion of the case.

### **Sample Advice to Students in Using Cases**

The first task for the teacher is to explain what cases are and they are important in learning. The following text may prove useful. It was adapted from a pamphlet prepared by the author and distributed annually to students in the School of Policy Studies, Queen's University. That is the School referred to in the text.

### **Why This is Important**

Case studies are included in a number of courses in the School's curriculum. Their use will vary from course to course. Some will involve groups working together to make a presentation to class. Some will require a written analysis and submission. Some are also individual assignments. Some also involve readings of case studies for discussion in class as a means of both learning and applying the theoretical content of the course. The School flavours a mixed approach to learning, one that encourages many different forms of both learning and expression. We do see the case study method as a valuable one in this array. Making the most of it as a tool will certainly improve the learning experience. Understanding the expectations of using this tool is equally important and useful.

### **Defining Expectations**

When assigned case studies, instructional staff expects students to:

- Study and understand the information provided in the case
- Diagnose the nature of the problem or problems involved
- Set the problem within the context of relevant public policy and management theory
- Search for alternative ways in which the problem can be resolved

- Recommend and justify a course of action as defined in the instructions for the case.

### **Describe The Case Analysis Method**

There are many different approaches that you can take to using the case study method. Whether in groups or individually, the following procedure is one that works effectively:

1. Read the case several times without trying to answer questions or solve problems – try to get an understanding of the policy or managerial problem being described.
2. Groups should discuss the case without rushing to an easy solution. Phrases such as “ What I see going on here is...” should predominate.
3. Start to define the salient issues – make notes of these. In complex cases, use charts or “issue maps” so you do not lose track of them when you start down a solution path.
4. Look for the “ elephants in the room” – what are big issues that are not really articulated or even ignored by the actors, the unspoken challenges or prejudices that need to be recognized.
5. Read and study the assigned questions. This will determine how to go about your work of applying theory and arriving at solution. Often case study assignments will ask you to adopt a certain approach or ask specific questions. Ignore these at your peril.
6. Decide which principles, theories or models, if any can be applied to the information you are given. How will these help generate solutions.
7. Match the theories that apply to the case information and the assigned tasks. Theoretical material is to be used in the analysis and solution of problems, not as an afterthought.
8. Your instinctive view of the “obvious answer’ may turn out right – or not. Regardless, the path in how you got there – the problem definition, analysis, theoretical underpinning – all have to take you there and be seen to do that.
9. Suggest a course of action that appears to address as many of the issues and problems as possible. Avoid the quick fix or easy solution that is not practical to implement. On the other hand, do not be afraid of specific action.
10. Be real. Your solution must have a ring of authenticity and ‘do-ability’ to it.
11. Return to your “issues map” and make sure you have covered all the issues in an appropriate way.
12. prepare your report or submission in a way that communicates an understanding of the issues, relates well to the literature and presents the end results in a clear way.

### **Point Out Some Challenges to Effectively Using Case Studies**

The following advice to students helps them avoid two key pitfalls in case study work: the quick but poorly thought out solution or excessive analysis without resolution.

- **Salience of data and issues** – Cases (and real world situations) may contain information of little real importance to main problems that must be addressed. Often this information will distract your analysis.
- **Separating ‘root causes’ from issues that you can act on** – The big picture is important, but action items like changing human nature or amending the Constitution in the next few months are hardly moving the case forward. Be realistic in terms of action and timeframes.
- **The quick fix or superficial solution** – This arises due to poor analysis or the use of too little case information.
- **The ‘More Information’ syndrome** – Blaming inadequate data for a failure to propose solutions will not work either in the case situation or in real life. There is seldom adequate information.
- **Failure to answer the questions posed** – This will often be seen as waffling or losing focus.
- **Picking ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’** – Quick value judgments often create narrow and unhelpful perspectives.
- **Superficial solutions** – For example, ‘develop a communications plan’ means very little – to do what, for whom, when and how much also be indicated.

○ **Appendix: Introductory Readings on Teaching with Cases**

- Boehrer, J. 1994. On teaching a case. *International Studies Notes* 19:13-19.
- Boehrer, J. 1990-91. Spectators and gladiators: Reconnecting students with the problem. *Teaching Excellence* 2. No. 42, Summer 1990. Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Boehrer, J., and M. Linsky. 1990. Teaching with cases: Learning to question. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*. No. 42, Summer 1990. Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Christensen, C.R., D.A. Garvin, and A Sweet (eds.). 1991. *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Christensen, C.R., A.J. Hansen, and L.B. Barnes. 1994. *Teaching and the Case Method*. 3rd ed. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Division.
- Cliff, W.H., and L. Nesbitt Curtin. 2005. An Open or Shut Case? Contrasting Approaches to Case Study Design. *Journal of College Science Teaching* 30(1):14-17.
- Cliff, W.H., and L. Nesbitt Curtin. 2005. The Directed Case Method: Teaching Concept and Process in a Content-Rich Course. *Journal of College Science Teaching* 30(1):64-67.
- Easton, G. 1993. *Learning From Case Studies*. London: Prentice-Hall.
- Fitch. B. and Kirby, A. 2000. Students "Assumptions and Professors"[ Presumptions: Creating a Learning Community for the Whole Student. *College Teaching* 48 (2): 47-54.
- Herreid, C.F. 1997. [What is a case?](#) *Journal of College Science Teaching* 27:92-94.
- Herreid, C.F. 1997/1998. [What makes a good case?](#) *Journal of College Science Teaching* 27:163-165.
- Herreid, C.F. 1998. [Sorting potatoes for Miss Bonner: Bringing order to case-study methodology through a classification scheme.](#) *Journal of College Science Teaching* 27:236-239.
- Herreid, C.F. 2000. [And all that jazz: An essay extolling the virtues of writing case teaching notes.](#) *Journal of College Science Teaching* 29(4):225-228.
- Herreid, C.F. 2007. *Start with a Story: The Case Study Method of Teaching College Science*. Arlington, Va: NSTA.
- Leenders, M.R., and J.A. Erskine. 1989. *Case Research: The Case Writing Process*. London, ON: Research and Publications Division, School of Business Administration, University of Western Ontario.
- Lynn, Laurence. *What is the Case Method? A Guide and Casebook*. 1996. Foundation for Advanced Studies on International Development (FASID) in Japan.

Lynn, Laurence. 1999. *Teaching and Learning with Cases: A Guidebook*. Chatham House Publishers. Seven Bridges Press, LLC.

Schwartz, P. S. Mennin, and G. Webb. 2001. *Problem-Based Learning: Case Studies, Experience and Practice*. Kogan Page Ltd.

Wasserman, S. 1994. *Introduction to Case Method Teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press.