

Case Studies

Purpose

The purpose of a case study is to provide opportunities for students to participate in an event or situation, review their actions and make decisions. Case studies take concepts, ideas and theories, and enmesh them in the lives of people who are trying to make decisions in a world that is bewilderingly complex. The case provides all the surrounding circumstances, misconceptions, problems and misinformation. A significant issue must be presented with abundant information but without referencing any conclusion. The purpose is to have the students examine all the data and relevant information from the case, provide substantial discussion and provide multiple points of view before arriving at a recommendation and a solution.

Good case studies allow students to improve their own processing by “stopping the action” on an imaginary field of play, and then asking how and why some of the imaginary players made the plays they did.

Process

As noted above, the real key to making a case study “come alive” is for the participants (both instructor and students alike) to actively participate in the process. In that respect, the instructor’s main role is to help his or her students understand the characters portrayed in the case, and at the same time, somewhat paradoxically, guard against students assuming an omniscient narrator’s point of view. One process is to present the case in acts, much like a theater play, instead of all at once. No one has the benefit of knowing the future ahead of time, and good case studies, along with good case study instructors, acknowledge that fact. Indeed, one of the principal jobs of a good instructor is to help students understand how fundamentally our past experiences shape our understanding of the present, and our anticipation of the future, and how to use the concepts, ideas and theories to guard against that all-too-human phenomenon.