

The Case Study

Students are provided with a narrative of a real life situation that sets up a problem or unresolved tension which students can analyze, research and resolve.

Appropriate Student Level: Any

Suggested Class Size: 3 – 100+

Ease of Use Rating: Moderate

Activity Description:

A case study is different from ‘small group problem solving’ and other problem solving activities because of the character and plot. A project/problem should closely resemble an actual case study. Cases can describe an actual event or composites of several events.

The situations can be developed from almost any materials – letters, reports, legal documents, descriptions of actual historical events. They should be realistic and complex, with a strong sense of plot and character.

The ‘case study’ is common in law school and business school but less common in other disciplines. The method is based on the study of real life cases and examining the elements as they happened in history. By dissecting the situation students can learn how the decisions were made and what they may have done differently given the same set of circumstances (and 20/20 hindsight).

By making the issues discussed in class more relevant to what students perceive as ‘real life,’ instructors have an opportunity to show students how they can apply the information they learn in class. For example, consider the 2000 Firestone tire fiasco. The problem can be looked at from a number of angles to meet objectives of a variety of disciplines:

- Marketing or business students may explore with the marketing nightmare it created for both Firestone and Ford. Through research and guidance, students may come up with a new damage control campaign to help either company from suffering a reduction in sales. Examine what each company did as a result and analyze the results, what should the companies have done differently? What did they do right?
- A materials science class may study the same incident to determine why the tires actually had the ‘blowout’ problem and suggest ways to solve it. Where the facts disclosed to the public realistic? Could there have been another reason for the problem? Etc.

These are just a few suggestions. The object of the case study method is to engage students in ‘real-life’ events that help them to see the relevance of the materials being taught. The case studies should be done in groups to allow for a greater breadth and depth of study. The cases may be assigned or the instructor may decide to have students find their own cases depending on class size, maturity of the students, or other factors.

References:

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- Herreid, Clyde F.(2000) "I never knew Joe Paterno" *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 30(3); pg. 158
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