

Making the Case: Using Case Studies in the Classroom

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We've all been there. It's late August or early January, and you find yourself scrambling to finalize syllabi for the semester's classes. Whether you need to upload the final reading assignments or find new ways to facilitate discussion and create student participation, your upcoming class is stressing you out as you juggle writing deadlines, research, and a variety of other responsibilities. So you reach for the sources and teaching methods that feel most comfortable to you.

To many diplomatic historians, or professors of international history more generally, case studies may not fall under the definition of something that we routinely assign to students. Business and law school instructors have used case studies for decades. Ask your friendly local history professor if they have used case studies in the classroom, though, and most will likely say no (some may even get increased blood pressure and a clammy sheen to their skin). We tend to see case studies as something foreign, something that works in other disciplines but does not fit easily into our neat little worlds of lectures and colloquia.

This needn't be the case, however. Looking more closely, case studies can be just as useful in the history classroom, as they "combine the power of storytelling with critical discussion, shared experiences, and rigorous academic practice and theory."¹

Case studies can be as long or as short as they need to be, and can tackle broad, general topics or focus in on one particular issue: the creation of the International Criminal Court, for example, or how the Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved. Most case studies fall into two different types: retrospective or decision-forcing cases. According to University of Southern California professor Steve Lamy, a renowned author and user of case studies and a proponent of case study teaching methods,

retrospective cases present the history of an important issue or event. These cases may tell a story of a crisis, conflict, policy debates, or policy problems from the perspective of all relevant actors. The story is told in great detail, focusing on the competing interests and tough choices faced by the critical decision makers. These cases usually provide excellent reviews of historical events.²

In contrast, Lamy notes that "decision-forcing cases encourage students to find answers to complex problems. These cases pose a problem with no obvious right answers."³

However, retrospective cases can easily become decision-forcing cases if the teacher stops at certain points and asks students questions. This flexibility is one of the best aspects of case studies, particularly those that involve the complexities of international diplomacy, where there are often no simple solutions to problems or crises that affect untold human lives. Instructors can use most cases

involving diplomacy and foreign relations in multiple ways.

Some cases, by design, are simulations of negotiations or multiparty talks, designed to teach students through a role-playing exercise. Your job, as instructor, is to assign roles to each group, hand out any "secrets" or unexpected new developments that the case study may include, and then let students dive into their roles. Other cases are not written as simulations, but instead provide concise, detailed background reading about a specific country, issue, bilateral or multilateral relationship, or crisis. Case studies can also serve as real-world examples of how a more general theory may play out, perhaps illustrating an instance of successful or unsuccessful conflict resolution, multilateral or bilateral mediation, or great power rivalry.

Both retrospective and decision-forcing cases can be used in the classroom in the traditional case study approach to set the stage for students to engage actively in an in-depth discussion of a particular event or crisis and analyze critical turning points or tipping points, while instructors moderate the discussion to focus on many different aspects of the problem or issue at hand.⁴

This engagement, this "active learning" or experiential learning in the classroom, is what sets case study teaching apart from other methods. There are excellent reasons to broaden your teaching repertoire to include case studies. They encourage students to learn by doing, and they hone critical thinking skills in a way that sitting and listening to lectures rarely can. According to the Harvard Business School (famous for its use of the case study method), when teachers use cases, "there are no simple solutions; yet through the dynamic process of exchanging perspectives, countering and defending points, and building on each other's ideas, students become adept at analyzing issues, exercising judgement, and making difficult decisions—the hallmarks of skillful leadership."⁵

Vicki Golich, who was an early adopter of the case study method and runs workshops on how to implement it in the classroom, lists four key reasons to use case studies:

- First, they provide detailed descriptions of issues and factors that help shape foreign policy decision-making.
- Second, students are provided with examples of how theory can be used to explain and understand complex international issues.
- Third, students are put in decision-making situations and are asked to make difficult decisions.
- Fourth, students receive an opportunity to evaluate decision making and to suggest ways of improving the decision-making process and policy outcomes.⁶

These are exactly the types of critical thinking skills we seek to instill in our students. The case method, in which “the teacher helps students work collectively through the material to understand it,” enables students to “both learn and apply the theory.”⁷

Of course, the case study method requires teachers to make some changes in the way they teach. “A case teacher resembles an orchestra conductor,” as one group of case study experts explains: “Much as a conductor creates music by coordinating individual performances, providing key signals, and knowing what the outcome should sound like, a case teacher generates learning by eliciting individual observations and analyses, asking key questions, and knowing what learning outcomes s/he wants students to achieve.”⁸ Although the learning objectives for any given day’s class—whether lecture or case method—will be the same, the method by which students build and absorb that knowledge differs.

To use case studies effectively, it’s important to prepare the students. Be upfront and specific about what participation in class means. It also helps to provide details in the syllabus and to use the first class session to break the ice. You can do this by asking students to state their name, class, major, hometown, and, briefly, some interesting fact about themselves (you can then do the same). This always eases fears about talking in class and usually ends on a lighthearted note.

As you approach the actual class session in which you plan to use a case study, sometimes it is best to provide study questions for students as they read the case—and reiterate that it is essential that they read the case study prior to the class. You may find discussion questions included in the case study itself, or there may be an instructor version or teaching notes. Discussion questions help direct the students’ thinking and reading, but they don’t give away any key points you want to pry out of them during the actual class discussion.⁹

For instructors, case studies are meant to be more than substitutes for articles or texts. It is important to be fully prepared to use the case study. First, know the substance: Read the case study thoroughly, make notes, and take a look at the deeper sources you may find in the footnotes or recommendations for additional reading. Before going into class, know what you want students to learn that day and how this case helps achieve that goal.

Second, have a fairly clear idea of the timeline of the class and how the discussion should progress. The teaching notes/instructor copies may include helpful guidelines. The actual classroom discussion may wind and weave its way from point A to point B, but you need to know where to start, how to keep the class moving toward point B and,

ultimately, how to land at the finish line. Questions are the key—again, teaching notes/instructor copies often include more detailed questions for instructors. And third, you need to know your audience. Knowing which students participate in which ways and who holds what beliefs, for instance, goes a long way toward fostering a good learning environment and creating a successful class.¹⁰

Case studies can seem daunting if you have never used them. They can be a bit more work at first, and they take some getting used to if you have taught only reading seminars and lecture courses. But case studies are well worth the effort. Instructors and students alike gain from the opportunity to engage in an active learning scenario. This is not to say that you should stop lecturing. On the contrary, cases are meant to be interspersed throughout a course so students can actively learn what they have been taking notes on for weeks.

There will be times when case studies won’t run quite the way you want them to, and for a multitude of reasons there will be times when your students just don’t respond on a given day. Always be prepared to punt. But if you know why you are using a given case, and you are well prepped with good questions (remember, those are the key), these moments will be few and far between. And remember the quote so often attributed to one of America’s first diplomats, Benjamin Franklin: “Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”

For more information on case studies and to find case studies in diplomatic history and international affairs, please visit Georgetown University’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy’s website at ISD.Georgetown.edu. Instructors can sign up to review free instructor copies in the online “Faculty Lounge.”

Notes:

1. “Teaching cases: a brief guide,” The Case Centre, <https://www.thecasecentre.org/educators/casemethod/resources/teaching-cases>.
2. Steven L. Lamy, “Conclusion: Teaching Foreign Policy Cases,” in *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne (Oxford, UK, 2008), 381–2.
3. Ibid.
4. Lamy, 378.
5. “The HBS Case Method,” Harvard Business School, <http://www.hbs.edu/mba/academic-experience/Pages/the-hbs-case-method.aspx>.
6. Lamy, 379.
7. Vicki L. Golich, Mark Boyer, Patrice Franko, and Steve Lamy, *The ABCs of Case Teaching* (Washington DC, The Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 2000), 4.
8. Ibid., 3.
9. Ibid., 15–18.
10. Ibid., 37.