

CASE LEARNING: *HOW DOES IT WORK? WHY IS IT EFFECTIVE?***

Case discussion requires more intense effort, from both students and instructors, than many more traditional methods of instruction. While the demands on time, energy, and personal commitment are great, the rewards of the case method are also substantial. With repeated exposure to cases, students improve their skill in analyzing and dealing with ambiguous situations and incomplete information. They begin to approach problems in a focused, confident way that leads to firm, well-reasoned conclusions even in the face of uncertainty. As well as developing knowledge and understanding, the process fosters good judgment and effective action.

The power of the case method lies in the active participation of the students. In learning from a case, they determine the relevant facts, analyze them, and draw conclusions about the cause of the problem and what action to take. Their conclusions often differ from both the protagonist's thinking and the case writer's own implicit diagnosis, although all are based on the same facts. The most powerful and interesting cases are those that allow for several assessments of the same situation, leading to several equally plausible and compelling conclusions, each with different implications for action.

In case learning, students encounter the problem before they create the structure to solve it; the method is basically inductive and experiential. The problems that cases present are subtle, complex, and persistent; they have no easy, definite, or correct solutions. In confronting such problems, students face the challenge of working out their own approach to defining, analyzing, and solving them. The experience is that of having the problem oneself and striving to find a way to resolve it, because the case method encourages students to see it from an action perspective rather than analyze it from a distance.

At the same time that it develops their skills, repeated exposure to the ambiguous and complex problems found in cases builds remarkable confidence in students. Case learning develops tolerance for ambiguity and fosters the ability to make timely decisions and take effective action despite incomplete information, unclear problems, and uncertain consequences. During case discussions, instructors encourage students to face these risks and move toward specific action. Through such practice, students learn to cope with the circumstances that will challenge them in the future.

Much of the power of the learning comes from the study group and class interaction among the participants. Learning from each other's as well as their own experiences is one of the most valuable opportunities this interaction affords. It also exposes students to others' analytic and problem-solving approaches, and this exposure encourages them to recognize and reflect on their own. The incorporation of many points of view into the case discussion fosters the fundamental strength of generating alternative responses to problems. The mere fact of the interaction enhances such skills as listening, articulating, and participating effectively in group enterprise.

Finally, it is difficult to define, but also difficult to overestimate, the impact of the fact that case learning is more than a sterile, academic exercise. By challenging the student to adopt an action perspective, experience the raw data of a problem, and determine his or her own means of coping with it, by engaging students in the relatively unstructured, but highly charged enterprise of case discussion, the case method involves the whole person, the emotions and the intuitions as well as the intellect. Such qualities as persistence, patience, and persuasiveness count, along with mental agility and power, just as they do in the real lives of professionals. Case learning educates the person who will become the professional, not just the mind.

** Based on *Questions and Answers About Case Learning*, adapted by Thomas Angelo and John Bohrer at the Kennedy School of Government from an article of the same title by Prof. Thomas V. Bonoma of the Harvard Business School.