

Using Real Cases for Instruction

Poster Abstract

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Introduction

Do you need to help students to build analytical and synthesis skills, learn to solve problems, develop mature judgment and critical thinking skills or enhance communication skills? If so, then you may want to consider using case studies in your instruction. Decision cases are teaching tools, which are well suited for interactive learning about agricultural issues, policy and management strategies. Case studies are similar to the storytelling approach to teaching and learning in that higher order learning is achieved beyond the specifics of the case itself. The student can understand the broader implications and ethical interpretations of certain decisions when using this approach. Decision cases represent reality and place the student in the position of discovering knowledge from a real situation. Cases can be issues of national concern or they can be localized to a particular region or community.

The case can be used for large class discussion as well as small group collaboration and integrated writing assignments. Cases can be used to illustrate parts of larger issues, to illustrate how values and beliefs influence the decision making process and conflict resolution. Case studies foster cooperative learning which is effective in allowing students to create knowledge rather than passively listen to yours. Research has demonstrated that cooperation among students produces greater achievement and higher-level reasoning, more positive relationships, greater acceptance of differences, and higher self-esteem.

Methodology

The first step is Assignment and Engagement. Students are usually given an assignment before the discussion. The assignment could range from something as simple as reading the case to a more complex task such as evaluating case information or doing background reading. The teacher might also use audio-visual aids or local news articles to enrich the students' understanding of the case. This helps get the student involved and develops a sense of ownership in the case. A series of opening questions seems to work well. The second step is Analysis and Discussion. The students systematically analyze the case and discuss it under the direction of the teaching objectives. Good questioning skills are important for the teacher. The third step is for the students to Respond to the case discussion and analysis. A decision does not always need to be made, but it usually is. The response can take many forms, such as recommending what decision should be made, expressing feelings during case discussion, conducting further case analysis, or identifying additional information needed to make an informed decision. Most of the cases are discussed with the total group input, then smaller groups work to investigate the facts and myths of the issue before a response is made.

Every case used should be used for a purpose. You should use the case to 1) define the dilemmas faced by the parties involved. This includes a presentation on the problems, undesirable outcomes, the parties involved in the issue, and the goals or objectives of each of the parties. 2) Determine the cause of the problem. This may involve providing examining the historical context, a shift in value paradigms, or similar causes. 3) Create some alternatives. 4) Select the Abest@ alternatives after the consequences are determined for each of the alternatives. It is important that the discussion leader help the student to discover the Afacts@ and the values of the case. This is difficult as many groups use scientific data to support their arguments in a particular issue.

Results/Implications

Many positive comments have been received from student evaluations. Students have said, A . . . the class has been really good. We have discussed issues that I was not informed on. I have realized it is important to be aware of the facts and to not just repeat what I have heard from TV . . . The experience of speaking in front of a group has certainly helped me . . . The relaxed environment of the class is great because it generates responses from students who otherwise would not say anything . . . hearing various opinions has also been good . . . I will certainly recommend this class to fellow students.@ From my observation, students also learn to grapple with complexity and ambiguity, work in groups, organize and synthesize issues, and realize that many decisions are based on political agendas.

Advice to Others

This is not an approach if you like to have a structured lecture. You must be flexible and willing to allow for discussion to move in many directions. You must be alert to emerging issues and keep up to date with current events in many fields. You must be a generalist, not a specialist. The greatest skill needed is the ability to ask probing questions or introduce additional information or hypothetical characters to broaden the case-s perspective. Many times you must question the reasoning ability of the student.

Some tips to effective use of this technique are to control the dominating student, try not to give the discussion too much structure, learn to ask probing questions, and try to include everyone in the discussion.

Costs/Resources

Case studies require a usage fee or purchase. Copyright laws protect some. Most sources allow for the duplication of the material for educational purposes.

References

Swinton, Scott M. (Ed). (1995). Teaching and learning with cases. Promoting active learning in Agriculture, Food and Natural Resource Education. College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University.