GRADUATE SCHOOL MODELS
The Case Method

Note: The case method is not typically associated with K-12 settings. It is more often associated with graduate level preparation (especially business schools).

Excerpted and adapted from: Christensen Center for Teaching & Learning (2016). Teaching by the case method. Harvard Business School. Retrieved April 6, 2016 from: http://www.hbs.edu/teaching/Pages/default.aspx

Overview:
The case method is a discussion and inquiry oriented teaching approach that places students in the role of decision-maker, confronting real-world situations complete with the constraints and incomplete information found in real life.

Unlike lectures, case method classes unfold without a detailed script. Successful instructors simultaneously manage content and process, and they must prepare rigorously for both. Case method teachers learn to balance planning and spontaneity. In practice, they pursue opportunities and "teachable moments" that emerge throughout the discussion, and deftly guide students toward discovery and learning on multiple levels. The principles and techniques are developed, Christensen says, "through collaboration and cooperation with friends and colleagues, and through self-observation and reflection."

Planning:
The spontaneous and "in-the-moment" dynamics of successful case discussions mask the considerable planning that instructors carry out prior to each class session. Case selection (or creation) is the most important feature of planning for using the case method. During the planning process it is useful for instructors to keep in mind questions such as: Why should students care about this case and this class session? Is this case representative of a more general phenomenon—is it an archetype? What is the underlying "theory of the case"? How does the case relate to other cases in the course module and other real world examples? By answering these questions, the instructor will be better positioned to design and execute a plan that allows the "forest" to emerge from the "trees" of the class discussion.

Outcomes

1. In-class learning substantially exceeds pre-class learning and further stimulates learning after class.
2. Learning extends beyond the individual class, yielding deeper insights through linkages across classes, modules, and courses.
3. Students are engaged in, energized by, and challenged by class discussions.
4. Students discover, articulate and develop most critical insights, with the instructor leading the process.

Preconditions

1. There is mutual respect between instructor and students, and among the students.
2. Instructor and students come to class well-prepared.
3. Instructor and students apply rigorous standards and are willing to take risks and consider different points of view.
4. The case, supporting materials, assignment questions, and teaching plan are well-designed and are part of an effective module and course structure.

Behaviors

1. Class starts and ends on time.
2. The instructor:
    a. prepares both content and process, including a clear set of teaching/learning objectives, a call list, a board plan, an opening question, discussion probes, transitions, follow-up questions, and closing comments.

b. listens thoughtfully throughout the class discussion.
c. actively manages class flow and structure, while responding flexibly to student comments.
d. poses challenging questions, cold/warm calls, and follow-ups to promote high quality class discussion.
e. stimulates thoughtful student-to-student discussion and encourages participation from a broad range of students.
f. draws on student background information in guiding the class discussion.
g. provides appropriate closure to discussion segments, class sessions, and course modules.

Students:

1. Participate and listen actively throughout class discussions.
2. Contribute ideas, analysis, and personal experiences instead of simply presenting case facts.
3. Build on each other's comments and critique and debate different points of view.

Phases:

Opening:

The opening of a case method class can exert a powerful influence on the success of the session as a whole. Openings include three distinct, but interrelated elements: the instructor opening, the opening question, and the student opening.

The instructor opening provides an opportunity to put the class in context, shape and clarify expectations, and heighten engagement. Some instructors prefer a minimalist opening, consisting of little more than a "Good morning!" followed by a cold call along the lines of "Chris, what should the case protagonist do?" This approach can generate a high energy start, with students immediately focused on a critical question for evaluation and discussion; it may also leave some students disoriented and unclear as to the broader purpose of the class. Other instructors prefer a more extensive set-up. They may position the case within the context of the course, frame the importance and relevance of the topic at hand, provide an agenda for the class session, and highlight elements of the case situation as a prelude to the opening question. This approach can create a solid anchoring for the discussion, but may dampen classroom energy and constrain student discovery. Ultimately, the optimal length and scope of the instructor opening for a specific class session will vary depending on the nature of the case, the topic, the participants, instructor style, and the timing of the session within the term.

The opening question sets the initial path for the class discussion. Experienced case instructors typically prefer to start with a decision-oriented or evaluative question, leveraging underlying tensions in the case to engage the student opener and fellow participants from the outset. Yet for newer instructors, working backwards from a decision point as the class discussion unfolds may be difficult to manage. They may prefer to start with a descriptive question such as "what is the situation?" or "what are the issues facing the case protagonist?' to develop a more linear flow to the discussion. The risk of this approach is a class that begins with an unengaging regurgitation of case facts. An additional consideration in the selection of an opening question is its relationship to the assignment questions. Some instructors routinely draw the opening question directly from the assignment, while others prefer an element of surprise or unpredictability in the initial question.

The student opening follows the initial question posed by the instructor. Within the HBS context, the opening question is typically a cold call-or "warm call," in which the instructor notifies the student just before the start of class or during the instructor opening. Case method instructors occasionally ask for a volunteer opener to begin the class discussion. Yet the use of cold/warm calls provides both the incentive for careful preparation and the challenge of responding in real-time to the instructor's inquiry in the presence of peers. The student opening, including follow-up questions, can last as long as 5-10 minutes, depending on the extent of the student's

preparedness and the instructor's approach to the start of class.

The Discussion:
The three essential skills of questioning, listening and responding are the backbone of discussion-based teaching. While each is important in its own right, the skills are intricately interrelated: the potential effect of a good question is only fully realized if accompanied by active listening, which in turn is an essential prerequisite for the appropriate response, whether in the form of an acknowledgment or further questioning.

QUESTIONING
Experienced case instructors employ different types of questions at various points in the class to shape the arc of the discussion toward student discovery and learning. Questions for Class Discussions (pdf) provides examples of questions found to be particularly effective in each of four major categories: starting a discussion segment, following-up during a discussion-in-progress, transitioning from one segment of the class to another, and handling challenging moments when the discussion is at risk of becoming bogged down or thrown substantially off-course. Instructors can prepare certain questions in advance of the class session-particularly questions designed to start each discussion segment and to probe for analysis specific to the assigned case. Other questions are formulated in the flow of discussion as instructors draw on a more standardized repertoire of questions in response to student contributions in real time.

LISTENING
The organic nature of a case method discussion requires instructors to listen carefully throughout the class session and encourage students to listen closely to each other. Effective listening goes beyond attention to the content of student contributions: it also includes sensitivity to the tone and body language of each speaker and the reactions of other participants. Instructors should listen not only to individual contributions on their own terms, but also to their relationship to previous comments and their fit within the overall flow of the discussion. Ultimately, careful listening enables the case method instructor to remain highly participant-centered, while still providing effective guidance for reaching core learning objectives.

RESPONDING
Case discussions can be profoundly affected by the instructor's verbal and nonverbal responses to student contributions. Instructor responses can provide feedback and direction to student contributors in real time, shape the content and flow of the discussion, and influence the energy level of the class. Case instructors find it helpful to acknowledge each contribution in some way, whether through a simple nod or verbal affirmation, a restating ("echoing") of the essence of the contribution, and/or the recording of the comment on the board. Yet experienced instructors are typically reluctant to give direct feedback after a comment, such as "brilliant analysis!" or "you're wrong." Instead they prefer an indirect approach, soliciting reactions from other students and using follow-up questions to probe for greater depth or clarity. In general, instructors should view responses as micro-level opportunities to guide the participant-centered learning process-typically through minimal means, but occasionally through more significant interventions designed to refocus, reenergize or otherwise redirect a meandering or confused discussion.

Transitions:
Transitions provide the connective tissue that links individual discussion segments ("pastures") together to create a coherent whole. They are typically used by the instructor to provide intermediate closure and frame the subsequent discussion pasture. The length of the transition may vary significantly depending on instructor style, the inherent logic of the discussion flow, and the duration, complexity, and degree of consensus achieved in the preceding discussion segment. In crafting the transition, the instructor must balance the benefits of intermediate reflection and expectations-setting against the costs of reduced student discovery and classroom energy.

Case instructors often signal a transition in advance to avoid either of two extremes: (1) an abrupt shift in the discussion flow or (2) a shift so seamless that students are unaware that the discussion has moved on. The instructor, for example, may employ verbal cues such as "let's take one more comment before moving on" or "let's step back for a moment and reflect on what we've done." Non-verbal cues, including the raising of a board or the physical movement of the instructor to the center of the room, may also be used to signal the close of the discussion pasture and the transition to a new one.

When using mini-summaries as part of a transition, experienced instructors often reference comments made by students during the preceding discussion pasture. This approach helps ground the transition in the participants' own contributions and resonates more powerfully with students than a pre-scripted summary prepared in advance by the instructor.

Closure:
The appropriate closing for a class discussion is among the most debated elements of case method teaching. Some instructors advocate a minimalist approach, arguing that extensive commentary by the discussion leader at the end of class violates the principles of participant-centered learning. They worry that students will become dependent on the instructor to present a definitive synthesis and analysis of the discussion, thus shifting responsibility away from participants to assess and continue to reflect on what they have learned. Other instructors prefer a more substantive close to the class, fearing that without some pulling-together of the class discussion, students may leave feeling confused, frustrated and perhaps demotivated. These competing views suggest that case instructors should take care to avoid the risks of providing either too much or too little closure at the end of a class session.

At an overarching level, students should be able to provide at least provisional answers to two fundamental questions after a class discussion: what did I learn today, and why does it matter? To the extent that there has been intermediate closure along the way-for example, through mini-summaries at transition points between discussion pastures-it may not be necessary or desirable for the instructor to say much more during the closing. Also, some instructors ask one or more students towards the end of the class session to reflect on lessons learned, shifting responsibility for closure wholly or partially to the participants.

For many case instructors, the closing is less about recapping the class discussion than an opportunity to highlight conceptual or managerial themes, provide a bridge to past or future classes, offer personal reflections, and/or inspire and motivate their students. Ultimately, the optimal length and scope of the instructor closing for a specific class session will depend on such factors as the nature of the case and the learning objectives, the quality of the class discussion, instructor style, participant expectations, and timing during the term.

Discussion Management:

Timing:
Case method teaching involves a delicate balance between organization and guidance on the one hand, and flexibility and responsiveness on the other. For each class session, experienced case instructors typically develop a detailed teaching plan that includes the structure, sequencing, and timing of individual discussion segments ("pastures"). (See Planning a Class Session.) Yet in real time, some discussion pastures develop more or less quickly than anticipated in the plan, and student contributions may lead the discussion in unforeseen directions. This organic nature of case discussions can create challenges for time management throughout the class session.

In the face of timing challenges, instructors should avoid the extremes of leading with an iron fist or giving unbridled free rein to the participants. A discussion that is managed too tightly may feel stilted or rushed and turn into a forced march through the case, fueled more by the desire to implement the teaching plan than to support student learning. Conversely, inadequate pacing

may lead the discussion to feel directionless, resulting in a class with limited student discovery and inadequate fulfillment of key learning objectives.

Most experienced case instructors pursue an intermediate strategy: instead of micromanaging the timing of each pasture, they choose 2-3 checkpoints around which to anchor their pacing of the discussion. If they reach a checkpoint sooner than anticipated, they can use the extra time to go into more depth in the following segments or pursue additional topics. If the discussion has proceeded more slowly than expected, they can draw on questioning, listening and responding techniques to speed up the discussion without giving short shrift to the learning objectives. This type of flexibility does not negate the usefulness of planning. Indeed, it requires planning, so that real time choices can be made in the moment with an informed assessment of the tradeoffs involved.

Participation:
Students and instructors are co-creators of class participation, and the stakes may be quite high, not only for collective and individual learning, but also for performance evaluation. (For example, at HBS participation often accounts for 50% of the total course grade.) During a class discussion, case instructors manage participation along two dimensions: who to call on and how to interact with students in the process of questioning, listening, and responding. In managing participation, instructors should strive to create a learning environment that students experience as fair, safe, and challenging.

During a case discussion, experienced instructors often rely on a variety of principles to decide which student to call on (or avoid selecting) at any point in time. Instructors might choose a student with expertise relating to the discussion topic to help clarify a difficult conceptual point or, conversely, select a student with little prior background to start off a discussion pasture. Instructors may seek to bring in less frequent participants by keeping a close eye out for their hands during the discussion and by cold-calling these students on occasion. Body language may also provide a useful guide: instructors may prefer to call on a student who reacts with excitement or confusion to a comment just made in the discussion, as opposed to a student whose hand has been up for some time. Instructors should track class participation on an on-going basis to ensure that their calling patterns are not biased with respect to certain demographic groups or individual students.

When calling on students, case instructors should endeavor to be simultaneously challenging and supportive. Besides the questions and responses instructors use with participants, tone of voice and body language can have a powerful effect on how safe students find the environment for participation. Experienced instructors may calibrate their interactions with individual students depending on the participant's background in the field and comfort level speaking in class. This does not mean, however, that instructors should relax standards or overlook weaknesses: on the contrary, maintaining high expectations for all students is the ultimate form of respect in the case method classroom.

Engagement:

At a superficial level, it might appear that student engagement in a case discussion is primarily a function of instructor style. Yet a charismatic personality is neither necessary nor sufficient to ensure a consistently engaging learning environment. Many case instructors use their Openings to frame the class in a way that engages students from the first moments of the session. The instructor's choice of questions throughout the class may also significantly impact engagement. Questions that call for a decision, evaluation or diagnosis are typically more engaging than those asking for case facts or general impressions. The use of challenging follow-up questions as well as cold-calling at multiple points during the class discussion also tends to heighten engagement.

A number of additional techniques can enhance student engagement during the discussion. One is the use of votes that compel students to commit publicly to a specific position. Voting

creates a sense of ownership, changes the pace of the discussion, and often produces debates that lead students to become invested at a more emotional level. Another technique is the use of role play, which allows students to experience dilemmas through the eyes of case protagonists and related parties. Instructors can raise individual student engagement by calling on students by name, referring to students' previous comments or relevant experience, and asking them to reflect personally on difficult issues raised by the case. Instructors also may employ vocal modulation, eye contact, humor, and movement around the classroom to enhance student engagement.

It is important to recognize that instructors do not need to generate high levels of energy throughout the entire class discussion to maintain engagement. Engagement can also be achieved during periods of thoughtful intensity and even silence, when moments of reflection may lead to deeper learning than that achieved in the context of heated debates.