Further readings and templates

# Chapter 5: Understanding how to learn at university

## The use of cases

### Case studies and case teaching

Whilst all the learning opportunities presented above are deductive – i.e. often teacher centred – case teaching is inductive and expects you to develop hypotheses from what you read or hear. Case teaching is a particular method of teaching whereby students are expected to read between 10 and 20 pages of information, and then develop some ideas as to why a particular problem has arisen and identify some strategies to solve that particular problem.

This method of teaching has been popularised by Harvard Business School, whereby students are assessed on their contributions to the discussion of a particular case. In principle, the method of teaching works like this:

1) Students are given a case study of an organisation or a situation before their class.

2) They then prepare their analysis – often in groups – so that they can answer the questions they are asked in class.

3) The class begins with a discussion of the case: there is no lecture as such, but the lecturer facilitates that discussion, directing some challenging ‘and what if … ?’ questions to named students, and bringing in knowledge as he or she needs to.

The reason that this works so well – particularly in a business setting – is that the cases are written so that there is no one correct answer. Instead the case will feature a lot of information, only some of which will be directly relevant, and the task for the students is to recognise what might be useful and what might be less useful. In doing so, the cases reflect the complexity of real life, and give students who may have no or little employment experience the chance to understand how complex working life really is. The educational philosophy behind the idea of using cases is that managers are often guessing about what to do, based on information, intuition, advice from others and previous experience: there are few right and wrong answers in management.

There are four main stages to preparing a case that you need to be aware of and follow before class (see the section below). As students prepare the case, they will be developing a series of ideas in their mind about why the situation described in the case has arisen. These ideas are hypotheses, or rather theories to be tested. The groups will give the students a chance to evaluate each others’ ideas before the class, whilst in the class the facilitator will push and challenge the students on the evidence in the case (Why have they come to the conclusion they have? How would they manage the consequences of taking a particular course of action? Wouldn’t their solution make the situation worse? Had the student recognised a particular piece of relevant information? etc. ) as well as ask other similar questions.

## Stages for preparing your analysis of a case study

In preparing your case for class, the lecturer will expect you to develop your thinking in a number of stages:

**1) Situation** – To take some time to develop an understanding of the information presented in the case. What do you see and read when you read the case? What themes speak to you – at the beginning of the case/by the end of the case?

**2) Question** – To find some relevant questions which you need to be asking yourself, and/or asking of the materials provided for you.

**3) Hypotheses** – To develop some hypotheses or theories about what might be going on or have happened, or why those things have happened or what might happen in the future. It is probably a good idea to write down what you think has not happened: a good class discussing a case will expect you to argue against other students’ views.

These hypotheses will come out of your own thinking and understanding of the course reading, and you won’t find them written online or in a textbook. Your own hypotheses might be quite different from those of other students: that is expected. You will have a class discussion about the case: as the name implies, that is a discussion – an expression of differing points of view. It is a good idea to write down what your hypotheses might be.

**4) Developing Proof** – To test those hypotheses by seeking evidence for what you believe is happening or has happened. You should also look for evidence confirming that any alternative explanations are incorrect, although a good case will not make that evidence easy to find. As you have written down your hypotheses, so too you should write down the evidence why you believe those to be true – or false.

Harvard is well known for producing individuals who are able to do very well in life: the case method pushes them to think through the cases thoroughly and get better at defending their own views, in public (in the class case discussions), and is one of the main reasons why students from Harvard are so successful.

If your lecturers use cases, then they might do so in the way described above (often referred to as ‘The Case Teaching Method’), or they may expect you to analyse a case and ask you questions in a seminar or tutorial setting. Such a use of case studies does, as the Harvard experience emphasises, push you to develop your analytical skills, and does represent the complexity of organisational life, but key to the successful development of such skills and such awareness is the preparation you put into your case reading and preparation.