

Writing Case Studies

1 Preparing a Case Study

1.1 Getting Started

The first two steps in preparing a case study are reversible in order, in fact they follow the pattern of the classic “which came first, the chicken or the egg” question. Does one think of an interesting ethical question or learning objective and then find or construct a scenario to illustrate it, or does one come across an interesting ethical situation or scenario and then construct the question or learning objective.

For example, one might read about a drug that was withdrawn from experimental trials because it was not viewed as having as much overall profit potential as an alternative drug although it is more effective for a small percentage of the population. This might spark a series of ethical questions about who are the stake holders in a problem: shareholders in a drug company, the majority of the people involved, the most disadvantaged of the people involved, and so on. Or one might be interested in ethical issues related to loyalty to family versus friends versus country and construct a scenario about surrendering information to a terrorist group at the threat of loss of life to one’s family.

The important thing is that there be clear ethical issues arising from a realistic situation with which those analyzing the case can identify.

1.2 What is a Learning Outcome?

A *learning outcome* is a statement that specifies what learners will know or **be able to do** as a result of a learning activity. Outcomes are usually expressed as knowledge, skills, or attitudes.

Learning outcomes provide direction in the planning of a learning activity. They help to:

- Focus on learner’s behavior that is to be changed
- Serve as guidelines for content, instruction, and evaluation
- Identify specifically what should be learned
- Convey to learners exactly what is to be accomplished

Learning outcomes have three distinguishing characteristics.

1. The specified action by the learners must be observable.
2. The specified action by the learners must be measurable.
3. The specified action must be done by the learners.

Learning outcomes should involve action verbs. Some example action verbs are: compile, create, plan, revise, analyze, design, select, utilize, apply, demonstrate, prepare, use, compute, discuss, explain, predict, assess, compare, rate, and critique. Some verbs to avoid are: know, become aware of, appreciate, learn, understand, and become familiar with.

Here are some example learning objectives. After analyzing this case study, the student should be able to do the following.

1. List the different agents who are affected by the scenario presented in this case study.
2. Demonstrate knowledge of the main concepts and theories of ethics (e.g., egoism, rights, duties, utilitarianism, Kantianism, virtue ethics and so forth) in analyzing the this case study.
3. Differentiate between what is good for Sallie Mae and what is good for her neighbor Freddie Mac.

4. List the action set for the different agents in this case study.
5. List which choices in part 4 are ethical decisions.
6. Write a moral premise for at least one and maybe more of the ethical decisions listed in part 5.
7. Prepare a statement of facts that would allow you to draw a moral conclusion for the ethical problem faced by Sallie Mae's father Lyndon B. Johnson.
8. Provide a moral premise, set of factual premises, and a reasonable ethical conclusion different from that of the eighty-ninth congress in passing the Higher Education Act of 1965.

1.3 Ethical Issues and Learning Outcomes

Make a list of well defined ethical issues and learning objectives for the case study. Identify the key ethical issues that will be presented in the case study. Decide on your pedagogical goals for those who will analyze the case, whether in terms of being able to analyze a given ethical issue or gain new ethical insights. Learning outcomes specify what participants are expected to know and what they are expected to be able to do, value, or feel at the completion of the exercise. That is to say, you have to think about or list the learning issues you would like participants to engage in while studying the case, and the learning outcomes that will be achieved after completing work on the case. Eventually, the learning outcomes help you determine the content of the case in terms of the concepts, rules and principles needed. An effective case should make participants interested in and motivate them to acquire a deeper understanding of the concepts and principles that have been taught or they are going to learn.

1.4 Determination of the Ethical Scenario

Find and/or construct a scenario that presents the ethical choice situations you have identified for the case study. The best cases are based on events that are typical of everyday life, ones that everyone can recognize and to which they can add their own experience or insights. Use as much factual information as possible. Quotes, exhibits and pictures can be included to add realism and life to the case.

Here are some questions that are often useful in deciding about the usefulness of a given scenario.

1. Can the story be portrayed as a web of decisions leading to certain consequences?
2. Can the story be told by, or seen from the viewpoint of, a central player acting under pressure and caught in a situation which requires the exercise of judgment in choosing a course of action? As the case unwinds, the central actor will be the vehicle for problem analysis and the identification of alternative courses of action.
3. Will the central figure be surrounded by other key actors or observers, able to add complementary or different insights into the problem? These people may either be friendly or hostile towards the central character.
4. Does the scenario have one central, broadly applicable theme plus several sub-plots and issues? Whilst the central issue could involve a choice to be made, making that choice could involve several other choices or dilemmas.
5. Is the end a critical decision point: where the central player must decide what to do? Or does the case present the decision make by the key actor and then ask for analysis of that decision?

1.5 Preparing the Case

Decide what information should be put into the case. You need to decide what information is needed early enough in the planning process because the availability of information directly influences your choice and quality of content. Moreover, the components of a case also determine what information is needed.

Start looking for materials to make the case real and actual. The materials may come from different sources. They might come from the reflections on your own personal experience, from stories that you have heard from friends or colleagues, or from articles and publications. The materials also can be obtained from interviews with experts on the subject matter that you are dealing with or with the personnel in a particular organization in which you are interested in and that is related to the case issues.

Make sure you have correct technical data and accurate factual information. The scenario needs to fit real world situations and parameters.

1.6 Writing the Case

A case should contain a description of the setting (time and place), the characters (personality and responsibility), and a sequence of events that are present in the problem or decision-making situation.

Cases are usually presented in a narrative or story format. A narrative is a story of an event. It includes what happened, who was involved, when it happened, why it happened, and how it happened. Good narrative brings the characters and actions to life. The usual way to organize a narrative is chronologically, in the order in which events occur. You may organize in order of importance, or start with the setting and time, or the actual event. Sometimes it can be more effective to start with the end of the action, or somewhere in the middle, and then tell the story through a series of flashbacks. No matter how you organize the case, the principle is to make the narrative structure clear by transition and focused on the points that you want to make.

A plot should be implemented in the case. The plot should revolve around an interest or conflict-arousing issue. The plot should provide uncertainty and draw readers into the particulars of the subject matter related to the case and the roles of the actors involved in the case.

The case should show different perspectives. A case writer should reveal the information in a way that the discussion of the case or the suggested solution for the case will draw the analysts into different interpretations, different judgments, different decisions and, consequently, different actions to take. A case involving armed robbery for the thrill of breaking the law does not leave a lot of room for ethical ruminations and judgment.

There should be sufficient background information to allow participants tackle the issue. Include not only the events that happened, but also how the people involved perceive them. There should be enough description in the prose of the case itself for participants to be able to situate the case problem, understand the various issues that bear on the problem, and identify themselves with the decision-maker's position.

In many case studies, the narrative may end with one or two case problems, which require the learner to analyze or solve a particular question.

1.7 Parts of a Case Study

1. Introduction

The introduction defines the problem to be examined and explains the parameters or limitations of the situation. It could be as simple as "Consider the following news story" or something more formal.

2. Overview/Narrative

The overview/narrative provides a scenario of the situation and offers more detail about the various players in the scenario, including the situation, people involved, and the issues in question. It may also

mention important background information, professional, technical or theoretical issues that arise from the situation.

3. Case problems

In many case studies, the narrative may end with one or two case problems, which require the learner to analyze or solve a particular question. Here are some common questions or problems.

- a. Provide a series of questions to be answered that will guide the group through the analysis process.
- b. Give a specific choice situation and ask the learners what key individuals in the problem should do next.
- c. Give the learners a task such as preparing a report recommending an action for review by a key official, or a recommended course of remedial actions for individuals involved.
- d. Ask the learners to prepare a list of key decision points in the problem where those involved may have made different choices leading to different outcomes.
- e. Provide two or three alternative outcomes or solutions for the problem and ask learners to identify strengths and weaknesses of each.

2 Some Characteristics of a Good Case Study

1. The incident has emotional power.
2. The incident entails difficult choices.
3. Is open-ended, allowing multiple interpretations and solutions.
4. Entails fundamental/underlying value conflicts.
5. Speaks to important aspects of your goals for your student learning.
6. Gets at issues that require or benefit collegial discussions,
7. Is related to the important curricular and pedagogical aims of the program.
8. The situation has stayed with you and wants to be told.

3 Some Ideas from Tom Tomlinson

Constructing Case Studies for Ethics Teaching

In constructing case studies, consider the following:

1. What is the ethical problem to be embodied in the case study?
 - a. A problem of deciding upon a general policy or principle?
 - b. A problem of interpreting or applying a general policy or principle?
 - c. A problem of conflict or conscience for an individual?
2. What are the learning objectives for the case study?
 - a. Practice in evaluating competing ethical positions?

- b. Practice in applying accepted ethical principles to particular circumstances?
 - c. Practice in articulating alternative courses of action?
 - d. Practice in developing acceptable compromises?
3. What are the salient facts or features that create the problem?
 4. Which features should be included to serve the learning purpose? Which features should be omitted to serve the learning purpose?
 5. How should the features be organized in a narrative?
 - a. Participant's or observer's point of view?
 - b. Chronological/historical or atemporal?
 - c. Plot-driven, including actors' motivations and perceptions?

4 Example Case Study

Case Study on Use on Animals for Veterinary Teaching

When students are admitted to veterinary colleges, they are generally focused on the goal of helping animals and alleviating animal suffering. Their orientation is bolstered by the veterinary oath, taken at graduation from veterinary school, that states, in part, "I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering, . . .". Furthermore, over 75% of freshman veterinary students have a stated goal of working with companion animals (such as dogs, cats and horses), as opposed to working with animals raised for food. As they progress through the curriculum, however, many students feel themselves conflicted between their desire to help animals and some of the requirements of the veterinary curriculum.

Veterinary medicine is a 4-year program leading to a license to practice veterinary medicine on any non-human animal species. During the first three (pre-clinical) years of the veterinary curriculum, some courses require students to use animal cadavers or live animals to obtain and practice certain sets of skills. Anatomy, which requires dissection of animal cadavers, is taught in freshman year. Over the course of their first year in veterinary school, students work in small groups to dissect one dog, one horse, and one cow per group. Cows for this purpose are purchased at auctions or from slaughterhouses and horses are typically purchased as low-cost animals at in-state sales barns. Anatomy staff at the veterinary college euthanize these animals and prepare them for anatomical dissection by injecting latex into veins and arteries to permit their visualization. Dogs are usually random-source (not purpose-bred) dogs that are obtained as prepared cadavers from suppliers in the southern USA.

In second year, students begin learning basic surgical skills. Cooperative relationships with local humane societies or animal shelters allow students to practice inducing general anesthesia and performing routine neutering procedures (spays and castrations) on dogs and cats from these sources. Such arrangements are mutually beneficial as neutered animals have a much higher chance of being adopted when they are returned to the humane society.

Surgical procedures of no benefit to the animal are not permitted by humane societies partly because of public relations concerns and the dependence of humane societies on charitable donations. In addition, the complication rate (bleeding, infection and breakdown of the incision site(s) or dehiscence) is much higher when inexperienced surgeons perform procedures than when experienced surgeons operate. Accordingly, common surgical procedures at which the public reasonably expects all veterinary graduates to be competent, such as intestinal surgery to remove a foreign object, are learned in the junior year using dogs that are purchased for this purpose. Commonly, dogs are retired breeding animals from research facilities. These dogs would be humanely euthanized if they were not sold for this purpose as they have reached the end of their useful reproductive lives. At the veterinary college, the students evaluate the health of these dogs

over 2-3 days and care for them during this time. Subsequently, the dogs are anesthetized, one or more surgical procedures are performed under general anesthesia, and the dogs are euthanized by intravenously administering an overdose of barbiturate while they are still under general anesthesia.

Questions for Analysis

1. Make a list of ethical issues that arise in this case study.
2. Consider the anatomical dissection of animal cadavers by veterinary students in their first year.
 - a. Identify all stakeholders in this issue.
 - b. What are the benefits of students using animal cadavers for anatomical dissection?
 - c. What are the costs of students using animal cadavers for anatomical dissection?
 - d. Is it morally permissible to dissect cadavers for student learning when the animals were expressly purchased and killed for this purpose? Why or why not?
3. Consider second year students performing neutering procedures on dogs and cats to be adopted out by humane societies.
 - a. Are there any changes to the stakeholders listed in 2a?
 - b. Are there any changes to the benefits listed in 2b
 - c. Are there any changes to the costs listed in 2c
 - d. Is it morally permissible for inexperienced student surgeons to neuter humane society animals for learning purposes? Why or why not?
4. Consider students performing intestinal surgery on dogs purchased for this purpose and humanely euthanized at the end of the procedure.
 - a. What interests are at stake in this situation?
 - b. Who are the stakeholders?
 - c. What are the benefits?
 - d. What are the costs?
 - e. Is it morally permissible for student surgeons to perform terminal surgical procedures?
5. Would your answer to 4e change if the animals used for the terminal surgeries were pigs instead of dogs? Why or why not?
6. Consider the situation in 4 above. Suppose that instead of euthanizing the dogs at the end of the procedure, the dogs are recovered from anesthesia and provided the same level of care as would be the case if they were pet dogs with caring, committed owners. Would your answers to questions 4a-4e change in this situation?

5 Some Helpful Links

http://www.bioethics.iastate.edu/classroom/case_studies.html
<http://www.web-miner.com/ethicscases.htm>
<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/CenterforEthics/cases.html>
<http://www.uark.edu/campus-resources/rlee/ethpsu06/casestud.html>
<http://ethics.sandiego.edu/resources/cases/HomeOverview.asp>
<http://www.businessethics.ca/cases/>

<http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/cases.cfm>
<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/teaching.html>
<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/good-case.html>
http://dls.intan.my/acsm/case_writing_process.htm
<http://www.schreyerinstitutione.psu.edu/Tools/Cases/>
<http://www.ecch.com/>
<http://cases.ivey.uwo.ca/cases/Pages/home.aspx>

COGNITIVE (Knowledge and understanding) 1. Demonstrate knowledge of the views of some historically important moral philosophers (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Singer).

3. Apply these concepts and theories to case studies and contemporary moral issues. 4. Articulate an understanding of connections between reason and feeling and between cultural and intellectual traditions. 5. Express conclusions with awareness of the degree to which these conclusions are supported by evidence.

AFFECTIVE (Skills) 6. Demonstrate imaginative, creative, and reflective abilities by articulating philosophical insights. 7. Present effectively in writing an extended argument on a topic of ethical importance. 8. Articulate counter-arguments to one's own position. 9. Ask questions to clarify problems further.

SOCIAL (Values) 10. Demonstrate openness and intellectual humility by approaching situations involving a conflict of views in a spirit of inquiry. 11. Identify and reflect on values through analysis of case studies in such areas as justice, abortion, and the impact of humans on the environment. 12. Reflect on one's intellectual and intuitive responses to issues concerning ethical values. 13. Demonstrate increasing awareness of the complexity of issues and of the necessity of examining issues from many different perspectives.