Writing Good Case Studies

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Steps for 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.
Example

For example, one might read about a drug that was withdrawn from experimental trials because it was not viewed as having as much overall profit potential as an alternative drug although it is more effective for a small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 friend versus country and construct a scenario about surrendering information to a terrorist group at the threat of loss of life to one’s family.
Realism

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

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- 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.
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- Eventually, the learning outcomes help you determine the content of the case in terms of the concepts, rules and principles needed.
Motivation

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.
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- Can the story be portrayed as a web of decisions leading to certain consequences?
- 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 judgement in choosing a course of action?
- 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.
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- 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?
Decide on Information Needed

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.
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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.
Correct Information

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

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.
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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.
Have a Plot

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.
Different Perspectives

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A case involving armed robbery for the thrill of breaking the law does not leave a lot of room for ethical ruminations and judgement.
Background

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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.
Case Questions

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.
# Parts of a Case Study

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- Ethical Issues and Learning Outcomes
- Determination of the Ethical Scenario
- Preparing the Case
- Writing the Case
- Parts of a Case Study
  - Parts of a Case Study
  - Case Study Questions
  - More Questions
- Good Characteristics
Parts of a Case Study

1. Introduction
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2. Overview/Narrative
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3. **Case problems**
Case Study Questions

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Case Study Questions

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2. Give a specific choice situation and ask the learners what key individuals in the problem should do next.

3. 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.
4. 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.
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5. Provide two or three alternative outcomes or solutions for the problem and ask learners to identify strengths and weaknesses of each.
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      - Good Characteristics 1
      - Good Characteristics 2

Good Case Studies
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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.
Some Characteristics of a Good Case Study

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6. Gets at issues that require or benefit collegial discussions.
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7. Is related to the important curricular and pedagogical aims of the program.
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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.