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Blending Theory and Application: Student-Authored Organizational Case Studies

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Abstract
Case studies have been used as a pedagogical method for nearly a century. The case-study method provides numerous benefits for students, encouraging problem-solving, perspective taking, reflecting, and strategizing. After a semester of reading and discussing published case studies, the purpose of this assignment is to have students write and analyze their own case studies based on their organizational experiences. This assignment blends theory and application, helps students engage in important sensemaking about their experiences, and calls on them to contribute knowledge and content to the course. Variations, debriefing prompts, and an assignment appraisal are included.

Courses
Organizational Communication, Interpersonal Communication, and specialty topic courses such as Conflict and Leadership

Objectives
- To help students connect course material to their own lives.
- To facilitate the blending of theory and application.
- To help students process their various organizational experiences.

Introduction and Rationale

For nearly a century, case studies have been utilized as a valuable pedagogical method in a variety of disciplines (Fyke, Farris, & Buzzanell, 2017). Because of their many benefits, cases are widely used in organizational communication courses. Cases encourage perspective taking, reflecting, and problem-solving while blending theory and practice (Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak, 2010). In addition, case studies can convey organizations’ complex, nonlinear, and context-specific nature (Kitano & Landry, 2001) in ways that traditional pedagogical methods

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1 Keyton and Shockley-Zalabak (2010) note, “Literally all of the undergraduate organizational communication textbooks now include cases as an in-text pedagogical technique” (p. xix).

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cannot. While lectures and textbooks help transfer information to the learner, the case-study method encourages students to think critically about content and then apply it (Ellet, 2007), providing students with “opportunities to analyze critical incidents, translate their own knowledge into practical applications and develop strategies for their own organizational practice” (Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak, 2010, p. xix).

Because communication is “fundamentally an applied discipline” (Fyke et al., 2017, p. xiv), I incorporate the case-study method throughout my organizational communication courses in order to combine theory and application. I developed the following activity, where students create and analyze their own case studies, as a fitting final assignment. I not only want students to continue the practice of applying theory, but by the end of the semester, I also want students to participate in the creation of knowledge and course content. After reading about this assignment, you can see how it can be applied to other, specific organizational-communication “topic” courses, such as leadership, conflict, negotiation, and gender, as well as to broader communication courses, such as interpersonal, relational, and family communication. I also include an entertaining variation.

Description of Assignment

Throughout the semester, students in my organizational-communication course read case studies from case-study books and from Harvard Business Review. For this assignment, I have students write their own case study based on their organizational experiences (e.g., paid work, volunteering, team sports, academic clubs). If they cannot think of anything about which to write, they can ask their parents or other family members for organizational stories and for the required case study. I have never had a student struggle to find an organization/topic. Then, I have them connect the case to three course concepts of their choosing, such as leadership, emotion, and organizational change. I also prohibit certain course concepts and theories that we have already covered, at length, in previous assignments, such as classical approaches to organizing or organizational culture. I typically give them a short list of exhausted topics that are barred for this assignment and tell them that anything not on this list is fair game. Depending on your needs and the course level (introductory, advanced, senior capstone, or even graduate course), you can determine the research parameters, such as having students only cite the lecture notes, textbook, course packet, etc.; you can also require students to include more traditional forms of research: journal articles, book chapters, etc. See Appendix A for assignment directions.

Variation

As one entertaining variation, instead of writing about their own—or family members’—organizational experiences, students can also write a case study about a fictional organization as though it were a real organization. Example companies from television include Dundler Mifflin (The Office), Pawnee Parks & Recreation (Parks and Rec), and Sterling Cooper (Mad Men). Examples from movies include Glengarry Glen Ross, Office Space, and Devil Wears Prada. The rest of the assignment works the same; the only difference is that students describe the fictional organization and characters as though they are real. Students can focus on a particular aspect of the organization (i.e., something that occurred in an episode) or can describe the organization generally in order to create their case. Then, students draw three appropriate connections (e.g., culture, conflict styles, gender and diversity, leadership, power, etc.). This variation can be useful...
if students struggle to select a real-life case, especially if they lack organizational experience when they take the course.

Not only can this assignment be used in organizational-communication courses and related-topics courses, instructors can use this assignment—and its fictional variation—for any course that blends theory and application. For example, in an interpersonal communication course, students can write a case about their first semester in college and then connect it to various principles and theories, such as uncertainty-reduction theory, social-penetration theory, and relational-dialectics theory.

**Debriefing**

I save time at the end of the semester to discuss the cases in class. Depending on the class size, students can discuss their case in front of the entire class or in small groups. I find that discussing the cases, at some point, in small groups—either when students turn in the assignment or earlier after I first assign the paper—is a nice way for students (a) to hear each other’s stories and (b) to process their organizational experiences. If I debrief on the day they turn in their papers, I follow these prompts: (a) In small groups, discuss your case (approximately 1-2 minutes) and the three connections you made to course material (additional 1-2 minutes). (b) How did you feel after the event in question occurred? (c) What did you learn about yourself, the organization, and other parties involved? (d) After taking this course, how would handle the situation differently? (e) Do you have any advice for the person in the case? (i.e., What would you tell yourself if you could go back in time?)

If I have a number of cases that are too sensitive to share (I tell students ahead of time to indicate if they are not willing to discuss their case in small groups.), and/or if I have a few standout cases, another way to handle the debriefing is to bring copies of the exemplary cases (with the students’ permission) to class. I only bring the cases, not the three connections that the student wrote to accompany his or her case. Students take approximately 8-10 minutes to read one of the cases and then discuss it as a small group, using the prompts below (tailored to the specific case). You can also use these prompts for published case studies that you might use in class:

1) What are some ways this case connects to the course content? Name as many connections as possible. [At some point, you can have the author share what three connections he or she chose.] You can also begin by having students take 2-3 minutes to create a list of how many connections to course content they can list, and then, they can share their answers with their small group.

2) Have students within the small groups take different perspectives or represent different characters in the case.

3) What would you do/how would you handle the situation/do you agree with…?

4) Would you work for this organization? What if you worked (or volunteered) for this organization and heard about this case? Would the situation impact your feelings about the organization or impact your interactions with people? Why or why not?
5) Have students create recommendations if the case is particularly open-ended. Students can also create recommendations using different theories or perspectives (e.g., classical, critical, human relations, etc.). You can assign various approaches to different small groups and then discuss the differences together as a class.

6) Do you have any questions for the classmate who wrote this case? (Often, students, both in this activity and throughout the semester, want to hear how the open-ended case studies resolve.) The author can decline to answer any question, and the instructor can preemptively decline for the author if the question is obviously off limits.

7) You can also ask students how they think the open-ended cases concluded. This question helps students with perspective taking and also shows a higher-level of comprehension. In other words, based on the author’s description of the case, e.g., organizational culture or the parties involved, students can argue what they think happened (or did not happen) next. This technique can help them think strategically about working in organizations.

If utilizing the variation of fictional organizations, you can adjust some of the debriefing questions. You can also ask questions about whether the portrayal of organizational life is realistic. (Why or Why not?) In addition, perspective-taking questions and questions about which approaches (e.g., classical, systems, or human relations) apply to the fictional case are especially useful.

Appraisal

I find this assignment to be very effective at helping students learn the course material, helping them to apply the course content to their own lives (blending theory with practice). As mentioned, the assignment is generally an important sensemaking activity. As they turn in their paper, I have had a number of students tell me that they really enjoyed writing the case, which is always great to hear, especially toward the end of a busy semester. Others have told me that the assignment forced them to analyze and reflect on their experiences, which will help them as they think about potential careers or when preparing to discuss past employment during job interviews. Those students who lack organizational experiences tell me that hearing their classmates’ stories gives them a better sense of organizational life for someone their age. The students’ cases often provide another opening for discussing ethical and social-justice issues in a more organic, student-led manner.

The main drawback of this assignment is that, while it is perfect for an end-of-semester evaluation of students, I would love to hear these cases ahead of time so that I can incorporate them into class throughout the semester. However, I know from reading some cases that students would not be comfortable sharing their most negative experiences with the class. This assignment does provide students with a chance to share their experiences with the professor. (If they share in small groups, the students can decide and control how much detail to share or to withhold. Students with serious concerns can opt out of sharing their case publicly). Another benefit of this assignment is that I can use anonymous aspects of the cases for future semesters, adding variety to my examples.
Appendix A. Assignment Directions

Write your own case study and connect it to three concepts and/or theories you learned about in class, citing any course materials (e.g., textbook, other case studies or articles, and class notes). The case itself should be 1.5-4 single-spaced pages and each of the three connections should be 1-2 pages, single-spaced. In total the assignment is 4.5-10 pages. Your case study can be written in first or third person, using a story format like a few case studies we have read [i.e., with dialogue] or they can read more like a synopsis of a situation. Read this opening paragraph as an example of the synopsis-style case:

“In the summer of 2010, I worked for Company Green. Company Green produces plastic bottles for various products and employs 115 workers of various backgrounds. The culture of Company Green is one of constant stress, worry, and conflict. This case study focuses on how a small group of employees finds ways to relieve stress and reduce conflict throughout the day, including trying to find moments of joy in an otherwise stressful, and often toxic, work environment.”

You can leave the case study open ended [i.e., like many cases we read this semester did] or you can explain how the situation was resolved, and then that resolution can also be part of your connection.

Each connection to course content should be written separately. In other words, do NOT weave the three concepts together. Also, the concepts should be different from each other. In other words, using two approaches to organizational change only counts as one connection. As another example, discussing two phases of socialization and assimilation only counts as one connection.

For example, you could connect your case to 1) company culture [1-2 pages], 2) critical theory [1-2 pages], 3) organizational change [1-2 pages]. Or: 1) socialization, 2) leadership, and 3) network theory. The combinations you can use are numerous.