Case Study

Purpose

The case study method is intended to identify, classify and understand a situation that can then be used as a model or point of reference for future interventions.

Tool 17.1 Harvard case method[10]

A supervisor using this method has one or more students make a detailed study of a particular case, a real-life problem situation. The supervisor then moderates classroom discussion, builds awareness of the situation based on his or her analysis, and elicits workable solutions.

A case provided by a student or the supervisor gives rise to open discussion. That is followed by in-depth analysis of the case and then decision making on ways to find a solution.

- **Supervisor's role**

  1. The supervisor presents one or more cases for study.

  2. The supervisor provides interventions, questions or position statements to encourage discussion.

  3. We recommend non-directive leadership to create a receptive atmosphere and stimulate interest in exploring the matter. The supervisor observes the quality of the students' thought processes and seeks to elicit an exhaustive analysis. This encourages learners to develop their analytical skills and firm up their understanding.

  4. The supervisor singles out the main points of the discussion, then summarizes the discussion and, if necessary, gives his or her own opinion at the very end.

  5. The supervisor provides feedback on the quality of analysis.

- **Advantages and limitations of this method**

  The case study method helps students use their knowledge and become more proficient at diagnosis, analysis, scope of action and problem solving. The students compare their ideas and explore the different aspects and complexity of a situation before making a decision.

  The limitations? If the students are not fully involved in the case study, the analysis could be a purely intellectual pursuit and the choice of possible actions mere invention. While the method does allow students to create, broaden or alter their mental image of the situation, that image does not necessarily pass the reality check. When that happens, learners are not motivated to develop their skills or attitudes "in action."

- **Case presentation**

  How well a case is presented determines how well it can be studied. The presentation must therefore include a full and complete description of the facts in order to inform users as accurately as possible, fuel discussion and stimulate that interchange by stating the objective, but not proposing any conclusions or solutions.

The information provided is factual and bears solely on the case under study. This means that:

- facts and events are key elements;
- feelings, habits, attitudes and beliefs (of the individuals in the case) are mentioned;
- the milieu is described (era, place and time, as well as social, economic and human conditions);
- information about the crux of the situation is provided.

The case must be adapted to the students' abilities and the type of situation they will encounter during their field placement or clinical experience. The case content should favour the use of knowledge and analytical skills and, sometimes, additional research on the issue at hand, personality development, the stages of human growth, and so on.

- **Examples**

The dramatized case study, simplified method, programmed method and Pigors' method are all derivatives of the Harvard case method.

Tool 17.2 Dramatized case study

The dramatized case method is designed to analyze a specific case by dramatizing factual information (through role playing, film, video taping, televised program, and so on). The situation is presented up to the culminating point, but no solutions are suggested. The students discuss possible solutions, and the supervisor has an active, but non-directive role. This method builds skills for making diagnoses, identifying the various aspects of a situation, thinking clearly and finding solutions.

- **Supervisor's instructions**

1. Preview the recording before the case presentation or learn about the role-play scenario.
2. Plan guiding questions or ideas to fuel discussion.
3. Prepare the case and distribute or summarize it. Your presentation should include the information needed for a clear understanding of the case (the text can be handed out before the meeting).
4. Facilitate discussion by asking questions, getting students to clearly express their opinions and highlighting the main points. But do not suggest solutions.
5. Condense the discussion and add your opinion about the case; provide feedback on the quality of the students' analysis.

- **Student's instructions**

1. Learn about the case.
2. Share actively in the discussion.
3. Take down the information that will help you understand and synthesize the case.

Tool 17.3 Simplified method

The students are given the salient facts of a situation, but nothing more. The advantages? The case takes less time to prepare, and it is easier to keep the discussion focused on the main points. In addition, this method is better suited for students encountering their first case study. As for drawbacks, the minimal amount of input limits the students' analysis and their opportunity to distinguish between primary and secondary elements before arriving at a solution.

- **Instructions**

1. Write up the case presentation and hand it out.

2. Use a board to set out the main ideas, analytical components and synthesis.

3. Learning is retained better when each student has to turn in a written analysis before examining the case together with the supervisor and the other students.

4. Suggest reading material relating to the case in order to fuel discussion and improve the analysis.

Tool 17.4 Programmed method

With this method, the case presentation includes calculated interruptions to discover what the students have understood by asking "What logically comes next?" This method works better with students who have already developed diagnostic and analytical skills. It favours use of the intuitive, as well as knowledge of human behaviours.

Tool 17.5 Pigors' method

This is another way to study a factual situation, but it differs in that participants are given only a minimal amount of information. They are expected to collect the missing information needed to analyze the case, but only the information they request is provided. In short, the supervisor has all the factual and contextual information, but provides it only when asked the right questions. Students sometimes end up making decisions without having drawn out all necessary information.

Next, each participant then writes down his or her decision and reasons for it, then informs the group of that decision. The supervisor facilitates discussion to reach consensus about a conclusion, which is compared with the decision that should have been made.

This method builds the students' skills at seeing relevant facts, thoroughly evaluating and analyzing a situation and embarking on decision making. In bouncing ideas back and forth, the students also come to realize the diverse range of views about a situation. They become aware of their own tendency toward bias or distortion of factual information (by giving it the slant they like), as well as emotional attitudes implicit in their seemingly rational decisions (Muchielli, 1969).

- **Instructions**

1. The students are given a minimal amount of written information and, depending on the case, a written explanation of the case study procedure.

2. The supervisor or discussion leaders (for a large group) have in hand the factual or contextual information to be used during the question period or when sharing ideas about decisions.

3. The supervisor prepares the students to use this method by explaining the procedure.

Villeneuve, L. (1995). *Cahier d'encadrement du stage supervisé*. Montreal: Editions Saint-Martin, pp. 38-41.