TEACHING ECONOMICS – THE CASE METHOD

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Abstract

One of the most efficient approaches in teaching Economics is the Case Method. The Case Method combines two elements: the case itself and the discussion of that case. A teaching case is a rich narrative in which individuals or groups of individuals have to make a decision or solve a problem. A teaching case is not a case study of the type used in academic research, as it provides information, but neither analysis nor conclusions. During the classroom discussions, the students perform analytical work, explaining the relationships among events in the case, identifying options, evaluating choices and predicting the effects of actions.

Key words: active learning, Case Method, Economics, teaching approach

Clasificare JEL : M40, M41

1. Introduction

Faculty members all over the world use the Case Method in courses ranging from Principles to graduate level seminars. It can work in ten-student seminars and in very large lecture courses. While some people teach virtually all of the material in the course using cases, most people use cases in courses in which they are also lecturing and doing other forms of active learning.

Case discussions, in the whole class or in small groups, help students learn effective listening and response skills, push them to present clear and reasoned arguments and enhance public speaking skills. They provide an opportunity for students to learn from each other, which gives them the opportunity to take ownership of their learning.

From the faculty perspective, case discussion provides a great opportunity for on-the-spot assessment of student learning, since the discussion reveals information about individual student's mastery as well as a sense of the gaps in the whole group's learning.

2. Pros and Cons for Using the Case Method

Cases are narratives that contain information and invite analysis. Participants are put in the position of making decisions or evaluations based on the information available. Cases can be acquired from the formal, purpose written material available from different sources (mainly well-known business schools round the world); or they can be constructed by faculty teaching staff from sources such as newspaper articles, cartoons, radio stories and even grocery store coupons and fliers.

Cases can involve situations in which decisions must be made or problems solved, or they can involve evaluation or reconsideration of existing policies, practices or proposals. Effective cases are usually based on real events, but can be drawn from both the present and the past, even the distant past.

Cases require students to make choices about what theory or concepts to apply in conducting the analysis, which is distinct from the one to one correspondence between theory and application that they see in their textbooks or hear in lectures.

Cases provide a rich contextual way to introduce new material and create opportunities for students to apply the material they have just learnt. The same overarching case can even be used several times in the same course, as students return to the story of the case with new analytical techniques and tools.

A typical example of a teaching case is the Main Turnpike Toll Discounts, used and described by Ann Velenchik from Wellesley College, material replicated on a number of sites as part of the SERC Pedagogic Service Project. [02] The text for this case is a coupon and survey distributed on the Maine Turnpike in 1995 as part of an experiment in using toll reductions to induce travellers to use the road during off-peak times on summer weekends. Discussion of the case introduces students in microeconomics to many of the concepts they will learn during the courses, and the case is especially well-suited to teaching on the very first day of class.
Good teaching cases are as short as possible, as they enable students to work closely with the material and master the facts of the case. Cases longer than fifteen pages of text are often more than undergraduate students can handle. Students must be encouraged to work with evidence. The ideal case allows students to hone their ability to use evidence by including both quantitative and qualitative data of varying degrees of relevance (including potentially irrelevant data) presented in a range of forms (narrative, quotes, tables, charts, or graphs). Students must be asked to do the work of the discipline, rather than watch or read about how it is done by others. By engaging in the case, students apply the concepts, techniques and methods of the discipline and improve their ability to apply them.

Case discussions bring energy and excitement to the classroom, providing students with an opportunity to work with a range of evidence, and improving their ability to apply the vocabulary, theory and methods they have learnt in the course.

The advantages of incorporating the case method in a fully lecture-based course are best understood as part of the bigger case for active learning techniques in general. Among the benefits of active learning approaches we can mention:

- active learning methods appeal to students in the affective domain, motivating them to engage with the material even when it is quite challenging;
- students learn the material more deeply and work with it at a higher level when they are active generators rather than passive recipients of knowledge;
- students retain more of the material they do than material they simply read, hear or see. [02]

Preparing to teach a case is as time consuming as preparing a lecture, if not more so. However, time spent teaching cases is time not spent lecturing on other material, and significant incorporation of case teaching means some topics go untaught. Students may need time to master the method, so early attempts can feel unsuccessful. On the other hand, the teaching staff themselves may need time to master the method, so early attempts can sometimes feel unsuccessful. Case Method teaching makes students more responsible for their own learning, but also reduces faculty control.

The basic requirements for a successful case teaching experience are: an appropriate case; students who are prepared to engage with the material in a discussion; an instructor who knows the case, has a plan for the discussion, and is ready to deal with the unexpected.

To be most effective, use of the case method should be embedded in the course syllabus, so that learning to learn in this way is one of the objectives of the course, and students have ample opportunity to practise their skills as case discussants. Going through the following steps, in order, will help teachers achieve that goal.

Cases that are designed to teach theory, probably the most challenging application of the case method, should be focused on solving a well-defined problem, and provide enough theory to give students the chance to arrive at a solution if they apply the new theory during the classroom discussion. Cases used as applications work best when they require students to choose which theoretical concepts or empirical tools are most appropriate, and create a framework in which students cannot solve the problem unless they think deeply about the analytical tools they have learnt and the types of questions they can address.

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Decision-forcing cases, in which the student takes the point of view of an actor who must make a choice, tend to engage students most easily, but equally effective cases can be constructed around evaluations of existing policies
whose outcomes are known. It is vital that a teaching case contains realistic detail, being set in rich political and social contexts.

3. Preparing Students to Learn with Cases

Student participation is central to the case method, and the effectiveness of the method is tied directly to the proficiency with which students participate in case discussion. Part of the learning process in the course is tied to developing students’ skills in doing the kind of analysis and discussion that the method entails, which means getting clear guidance about how to prepare from the teacher. Student preparation has two components: preparing the material and learning how to discuss.

Even the most verbally sophisticated student will need training in how to be an effective case method participant. Most students have experience with answering and asking questions from the instructor, but little experience in classroom discussions with other students. Good case discussion requires students to be engaged in a conversation with their classmates and to be ready to respond to each other's interventions, to use evidence from the case to support their claims, to role play and to work in small groups and to take a stand and defend it.

This sometimes is a difficult task for students, and helping them learn to do it can be seen as following three steps: explaining, modelling, and reflecting. The first step implies providing students with a clear explanation of the pedagogical goals, the reasons for choosing the case method, and the expectations for their performance. Some ground rules should be established from the very beginning: how frequently any individual student will be allowed to speak, how to use the blackboard or other means of tracking the discussion, etc. The more the students know about the procedures and their instructor’s expectations, the more effectively they can participate. [03]

By listening carefully, asking questions that open the discussion rather than leading it down a narrow prescribed path, and avoiding the professorial urge to respond to every student statement themselves, instructors can show students what they expect from them. Moreover, after each case, instructors should take time to talk with the students about the discussion, reflecting not only on the substantive outcome, but on the process, too.

Learning to be a good case student happens in the doing, so more practice will produce better discussions and more satisfied students.

Instructors can get that process underway by setting clear expectations, being careful in their own guidance of the discussion, and asking students to help them think about how to make the next discussion even better.

4. How to Teach a Case

The secret to successful teaching through the Case Method is instructor preparation, which is why introducing the method can be time-consuming. The best case discussions happen when the instructor is extremely familiar with the information in the case. An effective case instructor will have spent considerable time learning the case.

Leading a case discussion consists of two primary activities: questioning and listening. Although every discussion is different, it is important to have an overarching plan: start with the pedagogical goal; work backward from that goal; think about the problem solving steps; divide them into chunks and then think about the order those chunks need to go in; design questions to get them through those steps.

A standard set of steps might follow the following arc: describe the situation; define possible actions; identify the consequences of each action choice; select the most appropriate action; summarize and generalize the case. [01]

The questions in the discussion should move the students through this arc, but instructors should also prepare a series of questions designed to do smaller tasks, including: getting information from the case into the discussion; drawing student attention to important information they have missed; inducing students to respond to one another; fostering debate; clarifying previous questions and student comments; pushing students to support their claims and defend their points of view. [11]

During the discussion, the instructor acts as a guide or conductor, steering student participation to meet pedagogical goals and keeping the discussion moving. It is the instructor's job to make sure that the important ideas in the case get aired, that the discussion does not get bogged down in irrelevancies and that a range of ideas are expressed. Most important, the instructor needs to make sure that the discussion of the case meets the pedagogical goals. This is a process of questioning, listening, and questioning again.

At the end of a case discussion it is useful to take a few moments to summarize the discussion, highlighting the key analytical and conceptual points. Most students do not take notes during the case discussion (although some may write down what gets put up on the board) and some final summarizing remarks from the instructor can give them some record of the discussion to use for future reference.

The end of the discussion is also a good time for the instructor to get a sense of what students are taking away from the discussion. Students can be asked to do a form of one minute paper in which they are asked to write down
their answers to a few questions, including What was the main point of the case?; What did you learn from the discussion?; How well do you think you performed?; What did you like or dislike about the discussion?. [09]

5. Conclusions

Cases are used effectively to teach critical thinking and quantitative reasoning, and have been successfully applied in a wide range of disciplines including political science, economics, law, business, chemistry, history, and linguistics, and in both undergraduate and graduate classrooms.

After a thorough research and analysis of this method of teaching Economics in English we came to the conclusion that introducing the case method, like any other change in the pedagogical practice, represents an investment of the faculty time and energy.

It has not been proved yet whether the investment is worth it. Nevertheless, we believe that it is worth thinking about the case method relative to some alternatives, and considering the benefits and costs of introducing it.

5. Bibliography

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