

# Case Teaching in Public Management

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**Abstract:** Public management case teaching presents problems selectively through the description of certain situations, aiming to enhance students' ability to identify, analyze and solve practical problems. However, it is important to choose cases that meet the professional requirements of public management discipline and help students better understand and master relevant theories. The selected cases should reflect the current reality of public management activities and have strong potential for discussion.

## 1. Introduction

The origin of case teaching in public management can be traced back to the use of real-life scenarios that are relevant to the course content. It involves organizing students to analyze and discuss the scenarios in a participatory manner, which helps them to understand theoretical knowledge and improve their problem-solving skills.

Initially, case teaching originated in the field of legal education, where the tradition of judicial precedents in countries such as the UK and the US provided rich teaching cases for law schools. [1]In the 1870s, Harvard Law School introduced case teaching to enable students to understand specific legal principles and case decision standards, as well as the process of defense and adjudication.

Later, the case teaching method was introduced into medical education, where teachers in medical schools recorded the diagnostic and treatment process of clinical cases, and used these cases in classroom teaching to reinforce students' professional skills and improve their diagnostic and treatment abilities. After the first world war, the case method gained popularity in classroom teaching at business schools, with Harvard Business School as a representative. To this end, Harvard Business School allocated funds to hire professionals to collect and compile business cases for teaching purposes. It was through the case teaching method that Harvard Business School graduates significantly improved their business practical skills, and provided many business management elites for the American business field.

In the 1930s, case teaching was introduced in the field of public administration. Generally, real-life cases in the field of public administration are provided to students to analyze the specific political factors and decision-making problems involved in the cases. As public administration is an interdisciplinary and applied discipline, it integrates political science, administrative management, public

policy, and management of public utilities. It also involves cultivating practical abilities beyond basic theoretical knowledge. Therefore, public administration teaching emphasizes not only theoretical deduction, but also in-depth study of specific cases, analysis, and simulation training to develop students' analytical abilities and their ability to make decisions flexibly by combining professional knowledge with environmental factors. Case teaching in public administration uses specific cases in the field of public administration to recreate management scenarios and goals, in order to cultivate students' comprehensive abilities in dealing with public affairs based on specific political and social values.

## 2. The selection of teaching cases

From the perspective of public management, a case is either "a description of an administrative situation"[2]; or "a control exercise in experiential learning"; and "a statement of the decision-making problem"[3] A case is generally a real description of a specific situation in public management practice. Selecting the appropriate case for teaching requires careful planning and adherence to certain rules.

### 2.1. Alignment with relevant theories

Public administration has its own theoretical framework, and these theories also serve as guiding principles for solving practical public administration problems. Therefore, the cases used in case teaching must be based on relevant public administration theories. Through cases, students can gain insights into the management principles involved and achieve certain teaching objectives, enabling them to gradually master the tools for solving practical problems. For example, the case "From Observation to Engagement: The Way to Build a Resident-Participatory Community Governance System - A Case Study of Changzhou Road Street in Putuo District, Shanghai",[4]

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involves professional theoretical issues such as the construction of a two-tier governance and three-tier participation community governance system and specific community governance concepts.

## **2.2. Cases should have problem awareness.**

When selecting cases, attention should be paid to the problem awareness. The goal of case teaching is to further explore real-world problems. Based on problem exploration is the core characteristic that triggers students' debates and reflections in this teaching method. Cases with complex problem awareness serve as the starting point for student discussions and reflections. Different themed cases emphasize different theoretical backgrounds and reflect different requirements in terms of theoretical aspects. Some cases may aim to apply certain theoretical perspectives for decision-making or judgment, while others may be used to expound the application value of certain theories. Some cases may question certain theories and guide students to engage in divergent thinking, while others may focus on providing students with space for theoretical thinking to stimulate various insightful ideas.

The form of problems can be varied. They can be straightforward and explicitly stated to encourage students to think and analyze, or they can be hidden within a general description, guiding students to discover the problem through deep thinking. Problem-oriented cases can trigger conflict and stimulate debates on different viewpoints, which can train learners' abilities to analyze and solve problems.

## **3. Organization of Case-based Teaching**

### **3.1. Case Preparation**

The teacher needs to carefully read the case text, case appendices, case analysis report, and case teaching manual. Through reading, there is a clear understanding of the characters, events, structure, plot, problems, background, data, viewpoints, conclusions, suspense, and questions buried behind the text, etc., enabling a good grasp of the situation. In the process of lesson preparation, it is important to pay attention to the plot development of the case study and prepare certain questions at each possible turning point to guide or prompt students. To control the pace of classroom discussion and avoid too much deviation, teachers should manage the time for each unit and make timely prompts. Sometimes, a summary or conclusion may be made through questioning. Other times, unnecessary arguments or lengthy explanations should be interrupted in a timely manner. All of this should be prepared in advance during the lesson preparation stage.

It is necessary to review the theory or concept to timely explain it in case teaching. Sometimes different theories are involved in the same case, and sometimes the same concept is given different meanings, which need to be explained or elaborated before or during the case discussion. Teachers should have a correct understanding and psychological preparation for their role in case

teaching. In case teaching, teachers are not knowledge transmitters, lecturers, or publishers, but should be course designers, moderators, and arbitrators. Teachers should be fully prepared psychologically for case teaching, thoroughly understand the case and the possible problems that may arise, master the skills of discussion, trust, humility, fairness, impartiality, patience, summarize and refine key points, and be willing to operate and make mistakes.

### **3.2. Class grouping**

Study groups are the main learning platform for collaborative learning. Collaborative learning in a group requires members to work together to complete a learning task, with each member taking on different roles and relying on each other.[5]The class for case teaching should not be too large. During the teaching process, various auxiliary facilities such as blackboards, whiteboards, projectors, slides, and activity hanging cloths should be fully utilized. The teacher and students should ideally stand on the same platform and be able to move freely in the classroom to eliminate barriers. The classroom's shape is best square or semi-circular, without steps, and can accommodate about 30-40 people; The lectern is best placed in the center position, and the desks are arranged in a divergent distribution around the lectern, paying attention to grouping.

Group discussion often needs to be divided into groups. The rules for grouping are as follows: random grouping; pay attention to the number of people and gender ratio, usually 6-8 people are appropriate; adjust the groups regularly to facilitate communication; the group leader should be elected democratically within the group, and the group leader should coordinate and organize the group discussion; fully mobilize the enthusiasm of each discussion group, and arrange for each group to present or report on the discussion in a timely manner after the discussion, with a brief review.

### **3.3. Organizing students' pre-class case study**

One important step in case teaching is to require all students to study the case in advance. Without pre-studying the case, it is not possible to have a discussion. Therefore, it is necessary to organize students to read the case before class.

Usually, there are several recommended questions listed after the main text of the case. When reading the case, it is important to start with these questions and read and understand the case with the questions in mind. A good approach is to keep the questions in mind and try to find answers while reading. When reading the case, it is not only about reading the main text, but also reading the appendix based on the prompts.

Having a strong awareness of the problem is essential when previewing a case study. Here are some prompting questions to consider as a reference:

- Who is the decision-maker? What decision will be made?
- What are the decision-maker's goals?

- Who are other important players?
- What are their goals?
- What is the key issue?
- What is the objective environment (constraints, opportunities, and challenges)?
  - What actions can the decision-maker take? What will be the consequences?
  - What would you do if you were in that position? Why?

## 4. Classroom Teaching

The use of cases in classroom teaching has many characteristics that are different from general lectures. These characteristics are mainly reflected in the following five aspects:

### 4.1. Student-Centered Approach

In case-based teaching, the focus is on the students, who are actively involved in the case discussions. In case-based teaching, the teacher serves the students and strives to motivate them to think, speak, and debate. The case is not a template for the teacher to instruct the students, but rather a student-centered tool for spontaneous learning. Efforts should be made to help students grasp and master the case, and through case discussions, students' thinking, confidence, and abilities are stimulated. Case-based teaching shifts the roles of the teacher and the students, with students becoming the central focus and main characters in the classroom, while the teacher assumes a supporting role.

### 4.2. There is no correct answer

the purpose of case teaching is not to tell students what is right or wrong, not to give a value judgment of what is correct or incorrect, nor to find the ideal answer. A good case should not contain the correct answer to the question raised by the case, but should build a platform for students to make independent choices among many different answers based on their own experience, knowledge, information, and value judgments. Students should be told: in case discussions, there is no exact method of thinking, analyzing, or judging a particular situation, and there is no universally accepted best choice; There are only differences in opinions and students' emphasis and arguments for their respective viewpoints, and only the quality of the argument, not the correctness of the viewpoint.

### 4.3. Causing Debate

Case teaching is different from regular lecturing in that it aims to provoke debate rather than reaching a consensus. Cases should provide students with curiosity, controversy, questions, choices, information, and an implicit path for thinking and making choices based on the provided information. Students should be encouraged to hold their own viewpoints and defend them, as well as to question others' viewpoints and make efforts to refute them. At the

same time, students should be guided to argue their own viewpoints from multiple perspectives and to persuade and gain more supporters. In case discussions, the viewpoint that can withstand challenges and persist until the end is considered successful.

### 4.4. Discussion-based Case Teaching

Case teaching is based on discussion. In the case classroom, the teacher does not represent authority, and students are responsible for themselves. Knowledge, information, thoughts, and viewpoints flow bi-directionally and interactively between the teacher-student-student-teacher to enhance students' abilities and confidence in thinking, analyzing, summarizing, commenting, debating, and persuading. In the classroom, the teacher does not hold the power of speech, and students form a common discourse through discussion. The teacher plays a supplementary and corrective role through timely guidance and inspiration. Discussion gradually forms a public opinion and even a public space within the classroom, which can elevate understanding and awareness of issues.

In case-based teaching, the most tiring person is not the teacher, but the student. All students must fully engage in case discussions. Case mobilizes the full attention of all participants: reading, writing, thinking, watching, listening, speaking, discerning, doubting, analyzing, judging, choosing, deciding, summarizing, deducing, reacting, and so on. Only by being fully engaged can students actively participate and maximize the mobilization of their latent experiences and knowledge, thereby enhancing their abilities.

The essence of the case method is to bring the real world into the classroom through student discussions, creating a controllable situation within limited time, space, and information to facilitate students' comprehensive observation, participation, learning, analysis, and expression. Organizing case discussions is the most important step in achieving a controllable situation. Each group should elect or recommend a leader, who will then appoint a recorder, to organize the group discussion. The topics for group discussion are usually assigned by the teacher, and the discussion process is controlled by the group leader. The time should be uniformly controlled, usually within 1 hour.

Discussions can take different forms, but the basic content should include six steps:

Identify problems: List and explain the problems that are evident and embedded in the case.

Analyze problems: Conduct a thorough analysis of each problem, including the causes, consequences, and associated influencing factors.

Propose solutions: Identify various feasible solutions for the main problems.

Clarify character clues: Identify the key characters, crucial characters, and related characters in the case, analyze the roles they play, and their impacts, and clarify the character clues in the case.

Identify stakeholders: From the perspective of influence, identify the different stakeholders involved in

the case, analyze their positions, and the impacts they may experience in different solutions.

Evaluate/summarize lessons learned: Evaluate the outcomes of the case and other alternative options, and summarize the lessons learned from the case.

#### 4.5. Integration of other teaching methods

Other teaching methods can also be flexibly integrated into case-based teaching.

Role-playing method: For example, after students understand the concept and theory of crisis through a case study on public crisis, role-playing scenarios can be designed: Imagine you are an emergency manager in a small town that is prone to flooding. You need to develop a local disaster mitigation plan. Who would you involve and who would you seek help from to complete this project? [6]

Instructional Approach: Public management cases help students grasp knowledge vividly and intuitively, but they also serve as a means for conceptual thinking. In classroom teaching, there are many continuous, active, and even intense verbal construction activities.[7] Therefore, even in case-based teaching, appropriate explanations are necessary. Teachers should avoid using entertaining language and try to explain conceptual issues in language that students can easily understand.

#### 4.6. Conclusion and summary

There are many ways to end a case discussion, and here are some for reference:

- Voting, reaching consensus on major issues or decisions through democratic procedures;
- Induction, reviewing the main issues involved in the discussion, leaving the answers to students;
- Summary, summarizing existing views and new proposals not discovered in the discussion;
- Abstract, reviewing the amazing words and unexpected gains that emerged in the discussion;
- Discovery, sorting out ideas and identifying the best approach determined by students and you;
- Questioning, using questioning to ask students to review and summarize.

### 5. Conclusion

Good teaching methods can not only cultivate students' creative learning and thinking abilities, but also make up for the shortcomings in curriculum system design and content arrangement. [8]When students are placed in complex real-life environments, they can experience the various pressures that governments and decision-makers face in the actual public management process. Through this scenario modeling, students can develop the ability to make decisions based on limited information and cultivate analytical and critical thinking. Introducing case-based teaching in Public Administration allows students to be inspired through communication, actively think and explore rationally, and ignite more sparks of ideas. This

expands their imaginative charm and opens vast creative space. As a result, their research and innovation abilities will make greater progress.[9] At the same time, through case analysis, students can access specific public management materials and better understand the theories they have learned. Therefore, the role of case teaching in the teaching process of public management is significant.

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