

## Student Engagement and the Use of Case Studies

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**Abstract:** Students need to learn skills that will help them be successful in their professional and personal lives. Effective communication skills and the ability to engage in critical decision-making and problem solving are 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that are essential for every student to have. Case studies as teaching strategy engages students in reading, writing, critical thinking, problem solving, and cooperative activities, and can bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing students with the opportunity to catch glimpses of the world outside of academia. Everything, however, begins with engagement, i.e., to what extent are students immersed in the exploration of a particular case. This qualitative study aimed at examining students' behavior, interactions, and the learning environment, as well as what factors affect students' level of engagement. The number of students varied from 18 to 30, depending on class enrollment. Two undergraduate and two graduate classes were selected. The data were collected through video recordings. The hermeneutic video approach was used to analyze the data. The findings indicated that graduate students were significantly engaged during class sessions. Moreover, it was evident that more challenging cases promote greater interest in learning, especially among academically advanced students.

**Keywords:** Case studies, Case method instruction, Constructivist perspective.

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### مشاركة الطلاب واستخدام دراسات الحالة

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ملخص البحث: يحتاج الطلاب إلى تعلم المهارات التي من شأنها مساعدتهم على النجاح في حياتهم المهنية والشخصية. مهارات الاتصال الفعالة والقدرة على الانخراط في اتخاذ القرارات الحرجة وحل المشاكل هي من مهارات القرن الـ 21 الضرورية لكل طالب. دراسات الحالة كأحدى استراتيجيات التدريس تشرك الطلاب في القراءة والكتابة والتفكير النقدي وحل المشاكل، والأنشطة التعاونية، كما تمكن من سد الفجوة بين النظرية والممارسة، وتوفر الفرصة للطلاب للتعرف على لمحات من العالم الواقعي خارج الأوساط الأكاديمية. ومع ذلك، يبدأ كل شيء بالتفاعل، أي إلى أي مدى ينغمس الطلاب في استكشاف حالة معينة. هذه الدراسة النوعية قد فحصت مستوى مشاركة الطلبة ومحاولات تحديدا ما إذا كان هناك فرق بين مستوى المشاركة لدى طلاب الدراسات العليا وطلاب مرحلة البكالوريوس. لذلك كان المشاركون مزيج من طلاب الدراسات العليا وطلاب مرحلة البكالوريوس، والذين يتراوح عددهم بين 18 و 30 طالبا، تبعاً للالتحاق بالصفوف. تم اختيار أربعة مقررات دراسية لأغراض هذه الدراسة، اثنان من مرحلة الدراسات العليا واثنان من مرحلة البكالوريوس. تم جمع البيانات من خلال تسجيلات الفيديو. وقد استخدم منهج الفيديو التألفي لتحليل البيانات. وأظهرت النتائج أن طلاب الدراسات العليا شاركوا بشكل كبير ومؤثر خلال جلسات الصف. وعلاوة على ذلك، كان من الواضح أن الحالات الأكثر تحدياً تعزز اهتماماً أكبر بالتعلم، ولا سيما بين الطلاب المتقدمين أكاديمياً.

كلمات مفتاحية: دراسة الحالة، التعليم بطريقة الحالة، المنظور البناء.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The heart of teaching lies in providing students with tools that assist their learning. Too often students are accustomed to a “banking model,” whereby they come into a classroom and “pay” the instructor to tell them what to think and how to respond (Grise-Owens, Valade, & Cambron, 2010). However, many students need knowledge of core subjects. They also need to learn skills that will help them become successful in their occupations and personal lives. For example, every professional needs effective communication and group skills as well as the ability to engage in critical decision-making and problem solving. One way these skills can be taught is by using case study teaching strategy.

Today, the case study teaching strategy is used in a broad range of subjects to capture real world situations or problems. The intent is to deepen learning by providing students with opportunities to explore the kinds of scenarios that they may face in the future. As such, the case study teaching strategy represents Dewey’s (1938) idea of joining education with the real world through instructors’ presentation of cases that are relevant to the students’ environments. These cases should include realistic details that immerse learners into life-like situations that simulate the real world.

Case study teaching strategy offers students opportunities to apply their knowledge with real world examples, to deepen their understanding through analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Timpson, Brunson, & Sprain, 2010). The case study teaching strategy can offer rewarding experiences enabling students to practice solving actual problems and explore their own responses. The case study teaching strategy does not provide definite, clear-cut conclusions or solutions, although they do suggest possible solutions. The case study teaching strategy provides rewarding experiences that help students learn through active learning and engagement. When applied successfully, it provides students with knowledge that can help them learn how to think critically and manifest differently in varied situations (Noblitt, Vance, & Smith, 2010; Zuelke & Willerman, 1995). Moreover, the “case method makes

it possible to empower professional wisdom by relating theoretical knowledge to practical problem solving in real situations” (Sato, 1991, p. 2, as cited in Zuelke & Willerman, 1995, p. 604).

Furthermore, the case study teaching strategy provides a two-way stream whereby both students and instructors are active, albeit in different ways (Ellet, 2007). Case studies encourage collaborative learning through which students come together to take responsibility for their own learning as well as for that of their team members (Olorunnisola, Ramasubramanian, Russill, & Dumas, 2003). Case studies can tap into students’ prior knowledge and build a “schemata” that can help students interpret and respond to the subject under study (Ellet, 2007). It is noted that each student’s schema is unique because it depends on the student’s previous experiences and cognitive processes (Armbruster, 1986). Moreover, case study teaching strategy is useful in engaging students in reading, writing, critical thinking, and problem solving. Such studies bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing students with opportunities to experience glimpses of the real world outside of academia (Austin & Packard, 2009; Bennett, 2010). The case study teaching strategy can also give students opportunities to express their own knowledge, values, opinions, and interpretations of cases. Consequently, case studies offer many benefits and can help students to effectively integrate information and reach conclusions about a given situation (Noblitt, Vance, & Smith, 2010).

Some studies have examined the effectiveness of the case study teaching strategy as a learning tool and its difference from traditional learning (Noblitt, et al., 2010; Terry, 2007). In addition, many studies focus on how the case study teaching strategy enhance students’ critical thinking and communication skills (Bowe, Voss, & Aretz, 2009; Gallucci, 2007; Good, Halpin & Halpin, 2001; Vesper & Adams, 1972). However, no study has examined how to use the case study method of instruction effectively.

The purpose of this study is to examine the habits and interaction of students and their learning from a constructivist perspective by analyzing students’ behaviors, interactions, and learning environments. The goal

of this study is to examine students' behavior, interactions, and the learning environment, as well as what factors affect students' level of engagement. Particularly, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

- i. What factors influence students' level of engagement when using the case study method?
- ii. What is the role of the instructor when using the case study teaching method?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Cases are verbal representations of reality that put the reader in the role of a participant in the situation. The unit of analysis in cases varies ... but they have a common purpose: to represent reality, to convey a situation with all cross currents and rough edges . . ." (Ellet, 2007, p. 13). Case studies provide vivid background information and personal perspectives to show empathy and active participation. They include complex dilemmas of real situations and evoke integrative analysis and critical thinking (Carroll & Rosson, 2005). The case study method of instruction promotes professional growth and personal development, helping students examine their beliefs and values, listen to others' ideas, and strengthen their problem-solving abilities (Austin & Packard, 2009; Ellet, 2007; Wassermann, 1993). Furthermore, case studies enable learners to explore complex, real life situations, to understand how issues can manifest differently under different circumstances, and thereby to compare and contrast issues to gain a deeper understanding (Bennett, 2010; Noblitt, et al., 2010).

The case study teaching strategy can promote engagement and challenging learning experiences, which leads to a positive learning environment (Missett, Reed, Scot, & Callahan, 2010; Olitsky, 2007). When students are offered the opportunity to learn information in the context in which the information will be used, students tend to enjoy the learning process and retain more of the new information they learned (Olorunnisola, et al., 2003). According to Skinner and Belmont (1993), "engagement includes both behavioral and emotional components. Engaged students show

sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by positive emotional tone" (p. 572, italics in original). When engagement occurs, students are able to grapple with the concepts and ideas more deeply, and to show sustained, positive investment in activities (Ahlfeldt, Mehta, & Sellnow, 2005; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Research also shows that learning from case studies increases students' expectations in learning and their satisfaction about what they have learned. However, the variations in expectations and attitude toward adopting the method can differ from one student to another, which could be explained by differences in learning styles among students (Olorunnisola, et al., 2003). In addition, Bennett (2010) stated that not all students demonstrate levels of analytical thinking; consequently, interpretation might be needed to effectively use a case study teaching strategy. Bennett claims that students with a limited prior knowledge base have greater difficulty in forming links to the cases in order to develop their understanding. Hence, in order to help students become engaged and create links to issues of broader context; cases should be detailed and be relevant to students' environment. In addition, they need to include realistic details to help immerse the learners in a given situation, which simulates the real world. By providing rewarding experiences, students are given a chance to gain a deeper understanding of real-life situations and to gain practice in solving real-life problems (Bennett, 2010).

Some studies have examined the learning outcomes of an online course using case-based and problem solving approaches (Good, et al., 2001; Lee, 2007; Missett, Reed, Scot, Callahan, & Slade, 2010). The findings indicate that the engagement and challenge of an online course can lead to higher levels of thinking whereby students become engaged in sophisticated and complex levels of cognitive activity by defining, analyzing, evaluating, reflecting, and assessing. They also found that the case study teaching strategy helps students develop time management skills, self-advocacy, and awareness. Moreover, case studies provide a positive learning experience for many students (Missett, et al., 2010).

Other studies have shown that case-based instruction significantly improves student retention by making learning more interesting, engaging, motivating, and relevant (Gallucci, 2007; Prince & Felder, 2007). Additionally, case study teaching strategy can help students develop a sense of respect toward different perspectives and groups from varied backgrounds, and thereby promoting effective communication skills (Le Roux, 2002; Noblitt, et al., 2010). It was also found that case studies can also enhance students' communication skills. They help students organize information, integrate the information required for message production, communicate verbally and nonverbally, and expand their ability to adapt communication to the context (Noblitt, et al., 2010). Nevertheless, other studies indicated that case study teaching strategy can be successfully delivered in large class settings although it was noted that some students refused to respond and participate in discussion, and attempted to avoid group work (Doran, Healy, McCutcheon, & O'Callaghan, 2011).

### 3. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

This qualitative study is informed by a constructivist and social constructivist perspective. "Constructivist stance maintains that learning is a process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experiences" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 291). Constructivism involves providing experiences that resolve cognitive conflict and that encourage learners to develop new knowledge schemes that are better adapted to the experience (Driver, Asoko, Leach, Scott, & Mortimer, 1994).

The constructivist theory used to inform this study was presented by neo-Piagetian theories that focus on the importance of learning and development. Knight and Sutton (2004) further developed Piaget's constructivist theory and made it easier to recognize the fact that cognitive development occurs in adulthood. These authors have also added to the constructivist theory, maintaining that students come into classes at different cognitive levels during a class period. In addition, older students have a higher level of engagement than

younger students have and can interact more easily than younger students.

Furthermore, since "Piaget acknowledged that social interaction could play a part in promoting cognitive development through, for example, making different viewpoints available to children through discussion" (Driver, et al., 1994, p. 6), the social constructivist view "is constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks. Creating meaning is thus a dialogic process involving persons-in-conversation, and learning is seen as the process by which individuals are introduced to a culture by more skilled members" (Driver, et al., 1994, p. 7). This research focused primarily on such student learning as it takes place because of their interaction in a group or class.

The theories explain how case study teaching strategy can help the participants construct their learning. Both the constructivist and social constructivist learning theories explain how learners incorporate new knowledge, perspectives, skills, or practices into their perception of the world as they engage in learning opportunities (Merriam, et al., 2007). They understand that learning is an active rather than a passive one. Consequently, learning takes place through dialogue, conversations, cooperative learning, and group assignments (Woo & Reeves, 2007). Because case studies can help students develop a sense of respect toward different perspectives, it is possible for learning to take place through engaging, incorporating, and critically exploring the views of others (Le Roux, 2002; Noblitt, et al., 2010).

### 4. METHODOLOGY

Learning to use case study teaching strategy effectively is not self-evident nor easily mastered without guidance and supportive resources (Ellet, 2007). Therefore, a qualitative case study approach was used to investigate the learning outcomes and experiences of various courses that used case study teaching strategy. The qualitative case method approach was chosen because this approach allows "the researcher to go deep, to learn what works and what does not" (Corcoran, Walker, & Wals, 2004 p. 28). Merriam (2002) defined a

qualitative case study as an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 27). Case studies provide the researchers with an understanding of a holistic phenomenon, while preserving its full characteristic meaning of everyday events (Yin, 2009).

#### 4.1. Participants

Participants were a combination of graduate and undergraduate students who attended courses in which their instructors used case study instruction as their teaching method. The research was conducted at a public research university located in the Western region of the United States. All the students were native speakers studying in the department of education. Two undergraduate and two graduate classes were selected. The number of students in both graduate classes was 18 students while the number of students in undergraduate classes was 30 students. The class duration was between 60 and 85 minutes the total number of hours recorded was 285 minutes. Three instructors were involved, and each instructor assisted his or her own class.

#### 4.2. Data Collection

The data were collected through videos to allow the researcher to fully observe and record the use of case study method instruction, and to give the researcher the opportunity to re-frame, re-focus, and re-evaluate the analytic gaze (Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010). The goal of the videos was to capture a version of an event as it occurred, thereby providing opportunities “to record aspects of social activities in real-time: talk, visible conduct, and the use of tools, technologies, objects, and artifacts” (Heath, et al., 2010, p. 5). Prior to the recording of the classes, the students were asked to sign consent forms. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained for this study.

#### 4.3. Data Analysis

The hermeneutic video approach was used to analyze the data. The fundamental idea behind this approach

is to “consider social data as manifestation of the protagonists’ perception and recognition of reality as well as the self-representation and self-interpretation” (Knoblauch, Schnettler, Raab, & Soeffner, 2006). A two-dimensional approach to the hermeneutic analysis examining the level of engagement was employed. The first dimension was at the micro-level, at which the data were analyzed fragment by fragment in an attempt to make sense of actions related to the environment and the participants. For example, “What is going on here? Why are the participants behaving this way? And why have they chosen this option while rejecting others?” The time and the participants’ interactional space, language, gestures, and facial expressions were noted. In the second dimension of the analysis, all the data and their sequence were examined, with the goal of looking at the whole picture and interpreting what worked and what did not.

Skinner and Belmont’s (1993) definition of engagement, “includes both behavioral and emotional components. Engaged students show sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by positive emotional tone” (p. 572) was used to determine the students’ level of engagement: Therefore, while analyzing the data, observations of the students’ emotional reactions were taken. Students’ demonstrations of positive behavioral involvement, action, and voice tone were considered as high level of engagement. Conversely, if the students seemed withdrawn, bored, and not attentive, that was taken as a sign of disengagement. In addition, some components of the National Survey of Student Engagement (2016) were used to examine the students’ level of engagement; for example, were they asking frequent questions, working collaboratively with other students and analyzing, applying, and thinking critically during class.

After the hermeneutic video approach was completed, a thematic analysis was used to examine commonalities and differences between the relationships in the different classes (Gibson & Brown, 2009). The researcher searched for emerging common themes by examining the students’ behavior, interactions, and the learning environment, as well as the students’ level of engagement. In addition, a constant data comparative

analysis was used through domains and taxonomies to understand the relationship between the organized categories and to determine how the domains and taxonomies related to the whole case study method of instruction and to the students' learning outcomes.

To establish trustworthiness, a research journal was used to reflect on the degree of the researcher's subjectivity and to monitor the research analysis and findings (Glesne, 2006). Additionally, peer reviewing was done to increase depth of understanding and to produce rich and creative findings (Langdridge, 2007). Four researchers from the education department worked on the data analysis and collaborated to get multiple perspectives. Three of the researchers were assistant professors and the fourth was a professor. Each researcher independently analyzed the videos using a table that contained the time, theme, description of audio data and visual data that included the setting, body movements, and facial expressions. The team met every two weeks to discuss their analyses and findings collectively (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 2002). The process helped scan some of the raw data and helped determine "whether the findings are plausible based on the data" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 26). When disagreement accorded between the researchers, it was always less than 25%. The disagreements were discussed until all researchers reached an agreement.

#### **4.4. Description of the Setting**

In this section, details concerning the four classes that were videotaped will be provided, describing the settings, the teaching styles that were used, and the teacher-students' interactions. Participants were composed of graduate and undergraduate students. The number of students in both graduate classes was 18 students while the number of students in undergraduate classes 30 students. Students were all of English speakers studying in the department of education. Three instructors were involved, and each instructor facilitated his or her own class. The goal is to provide a detailed description of the interactions and behaviors within these classes. All the classes were taught near the end of the semester, when students had already spent a minimum of 12

weeks together.

##### **4.4.1. Case Setting 1:**

The video recording took place in a Public Communication class at an undergraduate level. The instructor for this class used the situational analysis approach. The instructor starts out the class with housekeeping issues. She then introduces the topic "Conflicts Worth Escalating," and poses questions to get the students thinking about the topic. The instructor is very energetic, has a clear voice, and uses hand gestures as she talks. She gives the students two minutes to write individual examples of situations in which they have experienced conflicts worth escalating.

Students interact with each other for a short time but then start quietly writing. The instructor observes her students and comments aloud, "So, at least by the nonverbal and side talk conversations, this is a weird, awkward question." She then goes back to information the students covered at the beginning of the semester. Again, she poses more questions and asks the students to take a few minutes to jot down some of their thoughts. However, the students look at each other with puzzled expressions and appear unsure what to write.

The instructor tells them, "Turn to someone close to you and discuss with that person what are some examples of conflict escalations." The students turn toward their classmates and start engaging in discussion. After a few minutes, the instructor calls the students to order and asks questions about their experiences, leading them from one question to the next. Students share their experiences and opinions about the topic. As the instructor listens attentively, she nods and uses hand gestures. She also supports any experience a student shares; she explains, and she provides examples so the students can understand and relate to topics which their peers are discussing.

The instructor then shifts from one topic and leads into another. She discusses the different readings the students did before class, requesting each set of students who read the assignment to participate; at the beginning, she pushes to get her students engaged...She then

goes through each set of readings and its theory. As she presents each point of view, her high voice and excitement make it obvious that she is very passionate about the topic. Finally, she asks the students if they have any questions.

Next, the instructor reviews the case study teaching strategy that was given to the students before class. The students listen attentively to her. She asks the students to discuss the case with the classmates sitting next to them; during this exercise, the students seem engaged and alive.

After a few minutes, the instructor brings the class together to discuss the issue. Some but not all students participate. The instructor then rephrases their statements and asks more questions. Interestingly, the students seem intimidated by the additional questions and do not respond. The instructor says "It seems some of you are intimidated." Then she uses the white board to write a few examples and pushes the students to explain.

Afterwards, the instructor discusses another concept and provides a cartoon caricature of it. She then again asks questions to get the students engaged. Students begin to participate and share their different perspectives. At the end of the class, the instructor tells the students that she understands that this topic is a hard concept to understand and wrap their minds around. She then asks more questions and gives more examples. She concludes by asking the students to take a few minutes to write what they have learned.

#### **4.4.2. Case Setting 2:**

This video recording takes place in a Special Population class at the graduate level. The instructor of this class has chosen to use a narrative style when presenting the case study teaching strategy. A guest speaker is present and active during the case.

The instructor introduces the case study, "Environmental Racism and the Privilege Gap" and explains what will take place during the session. He starts by passing out copies of the case study and tells the class that "this is his personal narrative." The instructor then starts reading the case; his voice is quite calm, yet very

moving and powerful. The students follow him until he reaches the midpoint of the case. He then asks them to read the remainder of the case silently.

After fifteen minutes, the instructor brings the students together and says "Let's start out with what are some of the emotions you felt while reading the case." The students start listing their emotions, while the assistant writes them on the board and the instructor listens attentively. The students seem to be moved by the case; indeed, many students appear uncomfortable and even disturbed. The instructor then looks at the class and asks, "Why were these emotions?" At first only a few students respond until one of the students asks "How can this happen in the United States?" From that point forward, the students engage in an open discussion, readily sharing questions, opinions, perspectives, and values.

The instructor then changes the topic to identify and critique the cultural patterns revealed in the case study. After that, the guest speaker starts sharing his opinions. The speaker has very clear opinions; the students listen to him attentively. Some students add to what the guest speaker has shared and it turns into an open, honest discussion. Without anyone's noticing, time flies by and the class ends after 40 minutes of open discussion.

#### **4.4.3. Case Setting 3:**

This video recording took place in a Classroom and Communication class at the graduate level. The case study teaching strategy was presented by a few of the students who acted out the initial part of the case study as a play. The class instructor and other students in the class were unaware that they were watching a play and consequently they believed what they were watching was real.

The play begins with the arrival of two University police officers who have come to arrest one of the students in the classroom on charges of sexually exploiting one of his peers. Everyone is shocked and no one intervenes, not even the class instructor. Chaos ensues and the students are in a state of panic. The "offending" student is taken out in the hallway for 10 minutes and afterward returns to announce that it was all staged.

Two students present the second phase of the case study using a projector in the darkened classroom. One of the students reads a newspaper article projected on a screen. The students listen attentively to the presenter. The article discusses sexual charges and public involvement.

With the lights turned on, another scene is performed. A press release is aired. Various students take part by reading aloud questions given to them before class. The case study ends with applause, and then the presenters initiate a brief discussion about the case and the dramatic events that have taken place.

The discussion goes on for 15 minutes. After this, the presenters introduce an activity, about which they first provide clear directions. The students are asked to get into groups, while the presenters circulate around the groups. After a few minutes, the class is brought back together, and each group is allowed to share its members' opinions and thoughts. An open discussion ensues. When it concludes, the presenters add to the comments and share their own opinions and perspectives on the topic.

#### 4.4.4. Case Setting 4:

The video recording took place in a Public Communication class at an undergraduate level. The instructor for this class used a video clip.

The class starts with the instructor's laying down new ground rules for the class. She tells the students that she will keep track of who participates. She also lets them know that she will call on students who are not participating. The instructor then starts asking questions about the topic, specifically about a video that students were asked to watch before class. Some students participate, while the instructor listens and nods. The students then watch a film. Then the instructor calls out a few students to role-play a scene related to the case presented in the film. The instructor introduces the characters and adds a bit of humor to the situation. The role-playing begins and the students listen attentively. However, the students doing the role-playing do not seem to be immersed into their roles. The play ends with applause; the instructor reflects on the role play

and raises questions. Several students participate and the instructor nods her head as she listens attentively. Then the instructor comments and gives feedback.

Next, she transitions to another point on the topic and uses PowerPoint slides to present the main idea behind the subject being discussed. One of the students asks a question and the instructor responds. Once again, she presents a film clip and asks the students to pay attention to the dialogue and interactions. Surprisingly, following the clip, the degree of engagement shifts to a higher level and the students share their opinions and thoughts willingly. The discussion proceeds for 7 minutes, after which the class is out of time.

## 5. FINDINGS

This study aimed at examining students' behavior, interactions, and the learning environment, as well as what factors affects students' level of engagement. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying data were eliminated. The analysis of the videos focused on two major themes: the instructor's role, and the learning environment. Each theme represents factors that affect students' levels of engagement.

**Instructor's Role:** An instructor who uses the case study teaching strategy serves as an overall facilitator who stimulates ideas, encourages creative thinking, organizes groups, and develops an appropriate closure to the students' experience (Langley, Senne, & Rikard, 1993). However, the findings of this study indicates that the instructors provide more than just facilitation. Additionally, they modeled skillful listening, the sharing of honest feelings, and being observant and attentive to their students.

In each of the four cases studied, it was clear that the three instructors and the role-playing students modeled listening by nodding their heads and listening attentively as students shared their opinions and perspectives. Because of this modeling, the students appeared to respect their peers and listened attentively to their peers' opinions, thereby creating an active learning experience within an open discussion. Such modeling also helped the students empathize with different perspectives, even those with which they disagreed. In

addition, all instructors were very open and forthcoming in sharing their values and opinions, which created a frank, honest atmosphere in which students felt safe sharing their thoughts and opinions.

Moreover, the instructors were very observant of their students' needs and emotions. In the undergraduate classes, the instructor was very aware of her students. She noticed when students were struggling with concepts, and she helped them to verbalize by asking probing questions that led to discussion. Also, at times she would ask students to "turn to the person sitting next to you and discuss your response." She would then bring the students back and discuss the question with the entire class. This technique helped students brainstorm and receive feedback from their peers, which helped them feel more comfortable when they were discussing concepts or issues outside their comfort zones. However, in the graduate classes, instructors did not put much effort into helping students deal with new concepts since the students themselves were already helping one another to examine, clarify, and understand the issues in a tolerant, open discussion.

**Learning Environment:** One of the main goals of case study method instruction is to provide and maintain a positive environment that is exciting and challenging (Timpson & Doe, 2008). In all four cases of this study, the instructors maintained an environment that was engaging and challenging by utilizing a few techniques that helped motivate the learners and produce a positive environment.

Before presenting the case by introducing the topic and providing instructions or ground rules for the class, the instructors set the stage for what followed. This helped students prepare themselves for whatever was expected of them. In addition, the instructors raised the stakes and challenged the students. For example, in the first case, students were asked to write about examples of points at which they had experienced topics worth escalating. This was challenging for the students since they were not able to recall or write about any experience of their own in this regard, which was obvious because the instructor commented, "So, at least by the nonverbal and side talk conversations, this is a weird, awkward question." In case two, the instructor present-

ed his personal narrative about environmental racism and privilege, a sensitive topic. The case created an unfriendly atmosphere among the students, which placed most students outside their comfort zones because the case discussed issues related to poverty, discrimination, and white dominance. Some students were shocked and could not believe the fact that such events still take place in the United States.

In case 4, the instructor introduced new ground rules for the class and announced that if students did not participate she would call out names. At the beginning, only few students were participating, but later when the instructor called on a few students by name, the students began to be involved and engaged in a discussion on dialogue in conflict transformations.

However, in case three, the instructor did not set the stage for the students, resulting in shock and increased tension in the classroom. On the other hand, it is important to note that the shock and tension hooked the students, engaged them from the start, and produced an active, open discussion among them. It also allowed the students to witness what happens during an arrest and provided them with a virtual real-world experience.

## 6. DISCUSSION

According to the findings, one main factor influenced students' level of engagement. It was apparent, the use of different teaching techniques and strategies is essential to help students become engaged and help them participate within the discussion. The more the instructors provide different teaching techniques the more students are able to understand the topic or issue from different perspectives. This was evident in all four case settings; the instructors used more than one teaching technique or teaching strategy. They used effective questions that helped pull the students into the discussion. They used different strategies like video clips, guest speaker, cartoon caricature, role-play, and group work to get students more engaged about the topic being discussed. They provided different examples therefore; students were able to relate and understand the topic more clearly. Most importantly, they

asked students about their experiences and opinions. As a result, students opened up and shared their opinions, thoughts, and feelings honestly and willingly. Consequently, the use of different teaching techniques and strategies helped students benefit more. It will help students use the skills and information they obtained when they are faced with similar life situations. This supports Austin & Packard study (2009) that when case study teaching strategy is utilized effectively and is based on real life situations or problems, it provides opportunities for both students and instructors to learn and grow, as it highlights a range of issues.

It is also evident from the findings that instructors have an important, complex role to fill, although on the surface it appears that they serve only as facilitators. They need to find strategies and techniques to encourage participation and engagement. They also need to model active listening throughout the case and allow the students to carry the discussion. In addition, instructors need to use thought-provoking, open-ended questions to stimulate discussion.

However, in reality, instructors appear to provide more guidance and use different techniques in terms of creating a positive learning environment for undergraduate students. At the same time, some graduate students do have prior knowledge and experiences that they can tap into. Hence, it is easier for them to participate and engage in an open-ended discussion. This supports the neo-Piagetian constructivist theory that students come into classes with different cognitive levels. Furthermore, older students have a higher level of functioning than younger ones (Knight & Sutton, 2004).

Moreover, many graduate students major in the areas represented by most of the classes they attend, which means that they already have prior knowledge about the subject. Consequently, engaging in such discussions is easier, more convenient, and interesting for them. In contrast, most undergraduate students appear to be trying to figure out whether such courses are actually important to their future careers, thereby making the students less motivated to participate and engage. Therefore, it is very important that instructors who use the case study teaching method with undergraduate students should be prepared and provide a variety of

teaching strategies. This will help hook the students and get them more engaged.

The findings also suggest that a high level of challenge promotes an interest in learning, especially among academic advanced students. Engagement occurs and is positively promoted when it is accompanied by strong emotions or feelings (Missett, et al., 2010; Olitsky, 2007). This was evident in case 3 when one of the teachers in the class was “arrested” during the role-play that took place at the beginning of the class. From the beginning, students were engaged and interested because of the shock and elevated emotions within the classroom. When they were thrown into a high-pressure situation, “students gained awareness of the emotional, intellectual, and procedural complexities of decision-making” (Austin & Packard, 2009, p. 223). In addition, case studies can help “articulate how the traditional consumerist education, while disempowering, is comfortably familiar and less demanding for students” (Friere, 2005, as cited in, Grise-Owens, et al., 2010, p. 142).

## 7. LIMITATION

Despite the interesting findings produced by this study, self-admittedly, its data collection was limited and hence possibly flawed. If the number of classes that were videotaped for both undergraduate and graduate levels were increased it would have provided the results with stronger evidence. Moreover, secondary data could have been helpful—for example, interviews or students’ reflections—to obtain a fuller picture of how to increase students’ level of engagement.

## 8. FUTURE RESEARCH

For future research, researchers can interview students and instructors to examine their reactions after attending an instructional case method class. Such research could be conducted as a narrative study to examine how students, individually and in groups, understand their experiences. This could enhance the teaching of case study methods or provide guidance to instructors on how to prepare and use the case study method of

instruction.

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