

The Case Method and the Interactive Classroom

By John Foran

The leaders of Melos faced a terrible choice: Have their Countrymen die as free men or live as slaves. The powerful Athenian generals and their fleet of thirty-eight ships carrying heavy infantry and archers waited at the shores of Melos ready for action as the Melians deliberated.

These are the opening lines of a short, three-page text called the "Melian Dialogue," adapted by Suresht Bald of Willamette University from Thucydides' great classical epic, *The Peloponnesian War*.¹

The text goes on to describe the plight of the inhabitants of the tiny island of Melos, an independent city-state for 700 years until caught in the crossfire of the fifth century B.C. struggle between Athens and Sparta.

The text contains Thucydides' reconstructions of the actual dialogue between the two parties, in

which the disadvantaged Melians make a case to remain neutral in the conflict, appealing to "what is our common protection, the privilege of being allowed in danger to invoke what is fair and right." The Melians point out that one day the Athenians might need to make such an appeal to a more powerful party themselves.

The Athenian answer draws on an early version of *realpolitik*: For them to withdraw would be a sign of weakness, and "As far as right goes ... one has as much of it as the other, and if any maintain their independence it is because they are strong, and that if we do not molest them it is because we are afraid."

When the Melians insist they have the right to remain neutral, the Athenians reply:

Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it

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when made; we found it existing before us, and will leave it to exist forever after us; all we do is make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do.... Your strongest arguments depend upon hope and the future, and your actual resources are too scanty as compared with those arrayed against you, for you to come out victorious. You will therefore show great blindness of judgment, unless, after allowing us to retire you can find some counsel more prudent than this.

This real-life dilemma is reenacted each term by my students on the first day of classes, in a manner as sudden and unexpected as the dilemma that confronted the Melians themselves. Asked to play the role of the Melian representatives, the students are given ten minutes to discuss options and decide on a single reply to the Athenian ultimatum, without any direction from me.

When I reenter the discussion as the Athenian envoy and demand their responses, they are typically divided. Some agree to submit and become part of the Athenian empire as a colony, seeing this as

the best way to protect their people's lives and culture. Others insist on fighting against crushing odds for their belief that independence is the greater ideal.

These stark choices are defended by those who advocate them with a variety of arguments that are unfailingly quite thoughtful and often emotionally and eloquently delivered in sustained back and forth debate.

For all of them, it is a sobering moment when I read the B part of the case, which tells how the Melians refused to submit and were soundly defeated:

The victorious Athenians showed no mercy, killing all adult Melian males and selling the women and children as slaves. Subsequently, Melos was settled by five hundred Athenians and it became an Athenian colony.

We go on to try and identify parallels to this situation in the contemporary world, and to reflect on the lessons of the discussion. In this way, each of my classes begins with a moment of high drama which actively engages virtually everyone in the room.

I have taught at the university level since 1980, first serving as a teaching assistant at the University of California, at Santa Barbara and

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at Berkeley while still a graduate student, and, since 1988, as a professor of sociology at Santa Barbara.

My teaching has three central aims: to convey a body of material that might be new to students; to encourage students' active participation in the process of making this material their own; to encourage students to reflect on and write critically about the material they encounter.

Over the years, I have tried to achieve these goals in various ways. At the undergraduate level, my teaching focuses substantively on issues of development and social change in the Third World—particularly, but not exclusively, in Latin America and the Middle East—and methods of comparative-historical research.

Most of these subjects are not otherwise found in the sociological curriculum at UCSB or elsewhere in the United States; this means that the topics often seem somewhat remote from the intellectual horizons of many of the students as they begin their course work with me.

One of the greatest challenges, therefore, is to make the material “come alive” for students by making it comprehensible to them and relevant to their lives as world citizens as a new century dawns, one posing very particular challenges to the

maintenance of critical thinking skills.

In my first five years of teaching at UCSB, until 1993, I aimed to meet my first objective—conveying an unfamiliar body of information to students—in a variety of ways. My lectures always included the deep historical and other contextual background required to situate the specific sociological issues and geographical places under discussion. I also used films, novels, and other materials from the regions we studied, as well as structured discussion of current events in those regions as reported in the print media in the United States. Further, I facilitated as much discussion as class sizes of up to 90 students would permit.

My second objective—to foster active participation by students in their own learning—I also approached through a number of strategies. In discussing current events, I asked each student to make a presentation of an international news item to the whole group. This student was responsible for answering questions about the news item, the entire exercise taking approximately 10 minutes in each class.

In my classes on the Third World and social change, I offered various alternatives for satisfying the written requirements. These included a

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traditional mid-term and final exam, conducted as “take-homes” in order to encourage careful reading, analysis, and writing; a journal of the students’ critical encounters with all of the materials presented in the course; or a research paper on a specialized topic chosen in consultation with me.

Each of these assignments required a minimum of 15 pages of carefully considered writing. In addition, I required a series of short critical summaries of the reading from each student to make sure they are grasping the main points, and to prepare them for discussion of the material in lectures and sections. Students often express appreciation for the choice which permits them to tailor their formal assessment to their preferred style of learning.

In all of the above, I aimed to encourage debate and the development of critical skills—my third main teaching objective. I informed students at the beginning of each term that we were covering topics of great complexity and social importance, that theories about the issues vary widely, and that they would have to form their own opinions, making careful arguments by marshaling data that support their opinions.

My general stance—committed to communicating some difficult truths about the realities of the

Third World without imposing a rigid perspective—was generally well received. As a result, students often developed a serious interest in, and knowledge about, Third World issues. Many said they read the newspapers more regularly and could better understand world events as a result of taking my courses.

While all of this was working reasonably well, there was still a lack of interaction in the classroom that troubled me, for I knew that students need to make material their own through more direct engagement with it. The distance from the subject matter of Third World social change was also an impediment to the reaching of my overall goals.

This changed after 1994, when I had the fortuitous opportunity to be exposed to the case method of teaching when I attended the Pew Faculty Fellowship for Teaching the Case Method in International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

This involved me in an intensive two-week seminar led by John Bohrer, with 24 remarkable faculty from around the country, mostly in political science. We were instructed in the case method of teaching, about which I knew virtually nothing at the time. Long known and used in professional

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degree programs such as law, business, and education, the case method has only recently been introduced into the social sciences.

This approach is a student-centered, highly interactive pedagogy that changes the classroom process into a collective search for an analysis and/or solution to a specific problem based on a “case.”

The case is a text that provides information about a situation, without analyzing it. Students encounter the “facts” much in the same way as historical actors do—finding them messy, partial, ambiguous. The job of the students, with the professor, is to fashion solutions to the problem through a process of facilitated dialogue.

The goals of the method include developing critical thinking skills, learning through decision-making and role-playing situations, developing confidence in defining, confronting, analyzing, and solving problems through interactive discussions, and exercising and developing skills in public speaking and group problem solving.²

At the heart of learning from cases is discussion in class. This discussion is a collective exercise. One might think of the class as a group of community members or colleagues, perhaps a team of government ministers or members of a political party, that has been asked to work together on a problem. At

other times the students are a single central protagonist facing a seemingly intractable predicament.

In my classes, the typical “flow” of a case discussion starts with a series of factual questions that set the scene and allow students to enter the discussion comfortably, followed by a lively role play, in which they “inhabit” the case and debate the terms of the dilemma.³ The discussion then moves on to an extensive analytic section in which the larger implications of the discussion are drawn out.

I returned from the case method seminar to UCSB, where it was my mission to learn to teach with this method and teach my colleagues about it. In 1994-95, I wrote a case titled “Allende’s Chile, 1972,” for use in my own teaching.⁴

This case re-creates a meeting that Salvador Allende held, in the year before the coup that overthrew him, in which the several radical parties in and outside his governing coalition advise him on what to do about the economy, the pressures of the U.S. economic blockade, and the political balance of forces internally.

The case forces students—and teacher!—to try to fashion a workable approach to sustaining Allende’s democratic socialist revolution in the face of almost overwhelming obstacles, and raises the

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profound question of whether there are alternatives in history (I believe that there are, and this exercise sometimes comes close to "proving" it).

I also began to use existing cases in my classes, with some success. I would open each new class I taught, for example, not with a long discussion of the requirements and subject matter, but instead with the "Melian Dialogue." Throughout the course, at every third or fourth meeting, I used available cases from the collections at the Kennedy School and Georgetown University's Center for the Study of Diplomacy on such matters as U.S. policy makers' reactions to the fall of the shah of Iran, or the build-up to the Gulf War, or the reasons for the student movement at Tiananmen Square.⁵

The results were quite positive. Sometimes, after discussing a case, I do an evaluation exercise known as the "one-word essay," in which I ask students to find the one word that best captures their experience of the discussion. This feedback is then read to the class, unedited, at the next meeting, so that everyone can know how it felt to the others.

"The Melian Dialogue," done on the first day of classes, has received evaluations such as:

enigma, collaborative, inter-

esting, pressed, inventive, wow, provoking, pessimistic, frustration, proud, difficult, helpless, idealistic, catch-22, resist, struggle, liberation, reality, confusion, courage, bravery, enlightening, intriguing, illuminating, wondrous, awkward, overwhelming, unsolvable, enthralling, unfinished, ambitious, intense, infinite, complex, exciting, invigorating, refreshing, intimidating, uncomfortable, thoughtful, fun, touching, intractable, inspiring, sad.

When asked to give a more elaborate evaluation of the case "Human Rights and Foreign Policy" in a course on the Middle East, students wrote:

I thought this discussion was an excellent way of voicing opinions and achieving different perspectives on the issues at hand ...

I thought that while the rhetoric between [the two main characters] was very confusing and sometimes ambiguous, this was an excellent exercise in becoming submerged in the real resolution of a tricky situation....

The discussion was unique in that the students had direct participation and say in what was said and done....

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thing like this. I think I learned more in one discussion about a lot of things than with just the instructor lecturing.

After their initial surprise at being called upon to take such an active role in class, it is clear that students tend to find case learning an enjoyable experience. They are also likely to find they need to develop some new skills. Frustration sometimes arises, for, like the situations faced by real policy makers, the information supplied in the case is frequently partial and, at times, even misleading. Alternatively, they sometimes find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information. To further complicate matters, the problems presented are both ambiguous and complex. Generally a case has no single "correct" answer; there are only choices, and the reasons behind them—some better, some worse, than others.⁶

Class discussion of cases is also intimidating to some students, and working together in a group to solve a problem is unfamiliar to many, as well. Unlike lectures, case discussion demands the ideas and participation of all the students.

But the results are often a revelation. Students learn how to present their ideas with conviction, and support them with as much care and persuasion as

they can. At the same time, they acquire new abilities to listen to their classmates, keep an open mind, and incorporate ideas of other students when they find them persuasive.

Participation levels soar: In a class of 70 students, it is not unheard of to have half or even more say something in the course of a 75-minute class session. In the end, the class discussion most often moves toward constructive solutions to the case, even where such solutions seemed nonexistent to individual students at the outset.

It is not unusual, for example, for one of my first-day students to suggest that the Melians adopt a tactical submission to the Athenian ultimatum, in order to engage in resistance of some kind in the future. Once put forward, this solution proves very popular. The particulars, and the advantages and drawbacks, lead to further discussion.

The main problem I encountered in using the case study method was finding appropriate cases for use in the sociology classes I teach on international topics, and particularly on issues of Third World social change. These topics often seem rather remote to students in the University of California.

I began to remedy this situation in 1996-97 with a grant that allowed me to set up a year-long

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workshop with 10 graduate students in which I taught the method, and the students wrote cases for classroom use.⁷

This was followed in 1999-2000 by another yearlong workshop, this time for four UCSB faculty members from different departments. In this workshop, all four instructors wrote cases for use in their classes. Over the past several years, I have done a number of workshops for UCSB graduate students and faculty. In the course of this work, my colleagues and I developed a style of case writing that we believe is particularly well suited to sociology, and which I call the “Santa Barbara School” of cases.

Unlike most cases, ours tend to put the students directly into the shoes of characters, sometimes real, sometimes fictitious, to make the cases—and in particular the role-plays we do—more realistic. Thus, one of our group’s cases summoned the students to a community meeting in the village of Di Tsi in Costa Rica, face to face with a mining corporation.⁸

Another case focused on a Filipina woman who had to weigh the options of working as a maid in Saudi Arabia or coming to the United States as a mail-order bride.⁹ A third, based on the life of Rigoberta Menchu, took the viewpoint of a 15-year-old indigenous girl in the Guatemalan highlands, caught

between the army and the guerrillas.¹⁰ A final, more fanciful case, is set in the 30th century, and describes a revolt of androids on a distant planet named DA-265.¹¹

Student reactions to the case studies and other data from students’ papers and course evaluations have convinced me that not only is the case method uniquely engaging to students and beneficial to their intellectual development, but that the Santa Barbara School contains the potential to draw U.S. students into Third World situations.

Sometimes students protest they couldn’t possibly imagine or say what Claudia’s position should be in the Guatemalan highlands, but more often they will make a real stretch of sociological imagination and human empathy to connect with her, and learn from the experience of looking at the world through another’s eyes.

These cases have proved to be a highly successful aspect of my teaching, as my students’ evaluations make clear.¹² More importantly, I believe this is a pedagogy with a bright future in sociology and the social sciences more generally. I believe it is a pedagogy that will help create a more democratic culture, one whose citizens are prepared to consider and debate various alternatives to their problems.

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study method is among the pedagogies of the future. For if the future is going to be more humane and hopeful than the present, today's and tomorrow's students are going to have to make it so, and the skills that are honed by the case method make us all better prepared to participate in a changing society. I typically end my classes on the last day by telling students:

What conclusions can be drawn out of this mass of information and the tangle of conflicting viewpoints? Everyone will draw their own, I hope. For my part, I want to leave you with an eyes-open optimism about the future prospects for positive social change....

I say "eyes open" because the historical record is filled with pain and sadness, broken dreams and unmet expectations.... The history of revolutions is marked by incredibly courageous uprisings followed by outcomes made all the more disappointing in light of their positive beginnings....

But I want to leave you with an optimism, too, because there is a hopeful current to this record that should not be obscured by its darker side. There is, to start with, the simple fact that people in many places, at many times,

have not just suffered in silence but have organized movements to change the conditions of their lives. Every one of these revolutions, no matter what its outcome, had at its origin ordinary people coming together under difficult conditions to stand up for something better, for themselves, their neighbors, their children. That takes courage and imagination, and these are two qualities that have been found in abundance in the pages that we have turned together this quarter....

I try to leave my students with the optimistic thought that change can be brought about, that the Third World is not an unchanging, unresisting victim, and also that we might play a positive role in bringing about change. The ways in which they live up to these choices and responsibilities are up to them; the ways in which I have tried to inculcate the sense of responsibility have much to do with the case method. My hope is that the next generation, faced with their own inevitable Melian dilemmas, will find more creative ways to react to the crises—large and small—that the new century will present them, perhaps even avoiding the seemingly only alternatives of fighting or submitting. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ “Melian Dialogue,” unpublished text by Suresht Bald, adapted from Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Random House, 1951). All quotes are from this text, which circulates widely in the community of case teachers. My thanks to Kum-Kum Bhavnani for suggestions on how to improve this essay.
- ² This characterization of the goals of the case method, and some of the procedures and classroom processes described later in this essay are adapted from the course syllabi of professors Louis L. Ortmayer of Davidson College and Brian Mandell of the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, who in turn adapted it from David Schodt of Saint Olaf College. Thanks are also due to John Bohrer, former director of the Pew Faculty Fellowship in International Affairs, Kennedy School, Harvard, and currently director of teaching resources for the Electronic Hallway, Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington.
- ³ My instructions to role players include: “Study what is told us about your character. Then think about what your character’s point of view would be. You should use your own words to capture the flavor of the character in the role play and are encouraged to go beyond what is given as long as you keep within what is known about the character. Inhabit the person you are playing, let yourself act!”
- ⁴ The text of “Allende’s Chile, 1972” with study questions, discussion plan, and teaching notes, is available at the Website: www.gisp.ucsb.edu/lais/ucsbcases.htm.
- ⁵ See “The Fall of the Shah of Iran,” by Gregory Treverton and James Klocke (Georgetown case number 311, www.guisd.org); “Prelude to War: US Policy Toward Iraq 1988-1990,” by Zachary Karabell (Kennedy School Case number 1245, www.ksgcase.harvard.edu); and “China 1989: Pro-Democracy Protest and Governmental Crackdown,” by Kenneth Mark Richman (Kennedy School Case number 9-390-156).
- ⁶ This paragraph and the next draw on the case guidelines elaborated by the faculty cited in footnote 2.
- ⁷ Our cases are posted for general use at www.gisp.ucsb.edu/lais/ucsbcases.htm.
- ⁸ Darcie Vandegrift, “What is Development? Who is the Community? Voices from a Town Meeting in Indigenous Costa Rica,” Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara (1996).
- ⁹ Paulette Haban, “Choices and Chances: Becoming a Mail Order Bride,” Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara (1996).
- ¹⁰ Edwin Lopez, “Decision for Survival and Resistance: Claudia, the Guatemalan Highlands, 1982,” Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara (1996).
- ¹¹ Ari Rosner, “The Case of Exploitation and Agency in the Thirtieth Century,” Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara (1996).
- ¹² Both student comments and the quantitative evaluation scores show a marked improvement in my teaching effectiveness since the fall of 1994 when I began to teach with cases.