


1989

## Using Plays and Novels as Case Studies in the Basic Course

Roger Smitter  
*North Central College*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca>

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), [Other Communication Commons](#), and the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Smitter, Roger (1989) "Using Plays and Novels as Case Studies in the Basic Course," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol1/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Basic Communication Course Annual by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

# Using Plays and Novels As Case Studies in the Basic Course

---

*Roger Smitter*

## Introduction

Case studies, in the form of plays and novels, provide an excellent way of integrating concepts, theories and experience for students in the basic speech communication course. In addition to making the argument for using novels and plays as case studies, this essay describes strategies for using them in a basic course.

## Definitions

Zaleznik and Moment provide the simplest definition of case, saying it is a “concrete instance of what people do and say” (viii). Lee defines a case as a “narrative statement about some happening involving people” (1-36). The speech communication and law school-business school literature suggest several generalizations about what constitutes a case study.

1. A case is a *narrative* containing specific information about complex events described in realistic terms. A case tells students what happened while allowing them to discover for themselves why it happened. The case focuses on people and their actions and not on concepts or abstractions. Students must sort through all the given facts in a case to find the relevant ones. The narrative form helps hold the reader’s interest.

2. A case presents a *problem* to be solved. The narrative uses conflict to build toward a climax. It draws the reader into the story. He or she seeks ways of dealing with the problem. Such solutions demand a well integrated understanding of the case and course material.

3. A case is *incomplete*. Cases never provide all the information about the events described. Identifying the additional information required to understand the case becomes part of the learning process. Students and teacher make a leap from the known facts to untried generalizations when analyzing the case.

4. A case does *more than illustrate* a single principle or theory. Students and teacher choose from many textbook concepts, definitions and theories in order to explain the case. Such choices lead to an understanding of course content on several levels.

Case studies however cannot be understood apart from an appreciation of *case method*. It demands instructor and students assume new roles in the learning process. They must explore the case together. The method demands a much reduced profile for the instructor. The instructor does not lecture about the case. Rather, he or she poses a series of carefully planned questions which elicit discussion in class while leading students to the place where they can draw their own conclusions about the case. Such understanding grows out of an application of the course material to understanding and explaining the case. The case and the course content, *not* the instructor, become the focus of the class hour (see Hammond, Hargrove, Hatcher).

## Advantages

According to Gibson, students develop two important *habits* when using the case method. First is the *habit of analysis*. Broadly interpreted, this means students learn to ask questions so as to understand the facts of a case before attempting an analysis of it. Students realize the facts of any situation are highly inter-related. Students also learn to make choices, selecting the most salient facts from the case

and the most useful concepts and theories from course content in order to explain the case. In the process, students develop an ability to analyze with new situations which arise in the world beyond the classroom and textbooks.

A second habit concerns *responsibility*. Students must be prepared to contribute in class, listen to others and argue for the interpretation of a case. Students learn to be responsible to the facts of the case. They cannot wish the facts were otherwise or impose idealistic solutions on the characters (Gibson).

Clearly, a novel or play provides a narrative in which conflict arises out of dialogue. The characters exist in realistic situations which engage the interest of the undergraduate student. Novels and plays present problem situations to which the students can apply course concepts to generate a solution. The basic speech communication course deals with concepts and theories which would help explain the communication within the case.

Given this overview of what others have said about the case method, three advantages exist for using a novel or play as a case study in the basic course.

1. *Integration of course content.* Cases help students better understand the complexity of human communication behavior. Students can see how the pieces of course content fit together to make sense of how people use symbols. Course content becomes more than a series of lists or topics to memorize.

The first advantage exists because novels and plays describe human behavior as it occurs, often in complicated and convoluted form, not in tidy packages. Most textbooks recognize that communication is indeed a complex set of inter-related behaviors. Many suggest that it is best seen from a systems point of view. Yet, by the very nature of expository writing, textbooks make the integration of material difficult. The novel or play used as a case study can help students (who often have not been asked to integrate material on their own) begin to see how one behavior influences another.

2. *Selection of course content.* Closely related to this first advantage is the way in which cases help students prioritize

course content. When analyzing the complexity of a novel or play, students come to realize that not everything in the textbook or professor's lectures is of equal importance in understanding the case. Students must select the content which is most useful to the particular problems presented in the case. In this process, students begin to develop the skills of judgement and discernment.

3. *Illustration of course content.* Case studies give flesh and blood to otherwise abstract concepts related to communication. For example, most textbooks say communication is best thought of as a process. After reading a full novel or play, the students may see in an especially vivid way how choices about communication behavior at one point in the narrative influence a character's behavior at subsequent points.

These advantages are especially important in the basic course which is often populated by the first or second year students. Research into student cognitive development says students need to move from the concrete level of learning to more abstract abilities. With cases, they are making the adjustment from learning by rote memory to learning to select and analyze material. They are beginning to realize no one answer is correct and that they can select from a variety of answers in a given situation. They also are learning that they must be able to support why they chose a particular answer.

The rest of this essay offers suggestions for a novel and a play which the author has used with success during the interpersonal and small group unit of a basic speech communication course. It will focus on the key textbook concepts which explain the cases. The essay concludes with several generalizations about using novels and plays in the basic course.

## **Two Sample Cases**

Two case studies, both of which have been used in the classroom by the author, will be described here. In each case, the analysis will provide a suggestion of the key

communication concepts for understanding the novel or play.

### *Goodbye, Columbus*

In Philip Roth's novel, wealthy college student Brenda has a summer love affair with Neil. He does not suit her family's plans for her, however. Neil's low self-esteem makes him easy for Brenda to dominate until their relationship reaches a point at which she must choose between him and her family.

The novel supplies an abundant amount of material for discussion in less than 100 pages. It is especially useful for showing how relationships can begin, blossom and die. The key communication concepts involve relationship development and disclosure. Brenda and Neil move much too rapidly toward physical intimacy without the necessary disclosure to sustain a relationship. They engage in several conversations marked by clever repartee. Yet, when they come close to discussing their feelings or plans for the future, they back away from a statement about their personal thoughts, often to engage in physical contact. About one-third of the way through the novel, Brenda asks Neil about why he works in a lowly job in the public library. She says it is her parents who want to know. He explains:

"Bren, I'm not planning anything. I haven't planned a thing in three years . . . I'm not a planner." After all the truth I'd suddenly given her, I shouldn't have ruined it for myself with that final lie. I added, "I'm a liver."

"I'm a pancreas," she said.

"I'm a--"

And she kissed the absurd game away . . . (Roth, 36).

These scenes and several others become excellent illustrations of how people avoid disclosure in relationships. Over the course of the novel, the reader sees how undisclosed feelings erupt in conflict which the relationship cannot accommodate. The final scene works especially well as an example of conflict because the reader has seen the development of the relationship.

## *Glass Menagerie*

Tennessee William's play has of course become a classic of the American stage. Laura is a disappointment to her dominating mother, Amanda. She does not attract suitors in numbers which her mother enjoyed as a young southern belle. Laura is shy and retiring in part because she is overly conscious of her slight limp. Laura's brother Tom is antagonistic toward his mother, who fears he will turn to alcohol and desert the family as her husband did.

The play comes to a climax when, at the mother's urging, Tom brings a friend from work to dinner. The mother quickly labels Jim as Laura's suitor. Jim turns out to be a boy from high school to whom Laura was secretly attracted. When they are left alone in the family dining room, Laura shares with Jim some of her feelings about him and more importantly about herself. Jim gives her praise. They share a kiss. But, then, Laura is brought down from her new heights when Jim reveals he is engaged to be married.

The key to understanding communication in this case is the interplay of self-concept and disclosure. The reader can readily understand how Laura's weak self-concept evolved given the domination of her mother. The mother's verbosity simply does not allow Laura to say much. The play also illustrates how the same verbosity and domination have a different effect on Tom. He rebels with words but usually gives in to his mother's wishes. Laura's rebellion take much more subtle form, frustrating her mother more than Tom's behavior.

The lessons to be learned about self-concept come most clearly from studying Laura's pattern of communication. She has been taught she is shy and timid and therefore acts that way. Williams shows in a number of places how subtle messages can help reinforce the self-concept a person holds. In the following dialogue, Laura and her mother argue about why she still has not found a husband.

Laura: I'm crippled.

Amanda: Nonsense. Laura, I've told you never, never to use that word. Why, you're not crippled, you just have a little defect . . . hardly noticeable, even. When people

have some slight disadvantage like that, they cultivate other things to make up for it . . . develop charm . . . and vivacity . . . and charm! One thing your father had plenty of . . . was charm (Williams 65):

The message here is one which disconfirms Laura as a person. She cannot develop other attributes until she acknowledges and accepts her limp. The passage reveals how words can become powerful labels which affect what people see. Her mother's words prevent growth from occurring. Students can see in this and other scenes the subtle way in which communication influences the growth of the self-concept.

## Principles of Using Cases

This discussion suggests ways to use novels and plays as cases in the basic course. The paper will look first at how material for cases should be selected. Then, specific information about utilizing cases will be offered.

### *Case Selection*

Clearly, a play or novel should involve a complex set of human relationships which reveal communication problems at several levels. How characters use dialogue should be the primary means by which the reader learns about those characters and the problems in their relationships. Obviously plays present an advantage in that the student has only dialogue. This approximates real life more closely than the novel in which the character's inner thoughts are revealed along with dialogue.

The novel or play should be realistic in tone. Dialogue and settings need not be exclusively those of the contemporary scene. Yet, they should be similar to ones students encounter. The cases need not always focus on youth as implied in the cases described above. Yet, the struggles of youth often involve learning new forms of communicating, relationship development, and changes in self-concept. These topics are central to most basic classes.



To the extent the case engages the reader at an intellectual and an emotional level, it will prove useful.

The case should have a serious intent which can be analyzed on several levels. Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* contains delightful dialogue which mocks social norms. But, once this point is made, not much else can be said about the communication in the play. For the purpose of the basic course, its function is limited to this one dimension.

The case should help students move beyond simplistic answers. Students must be challenged to make choices concerning the case. That is, the case must be complex enough so that they must sort out many issues to get to the key one. In this process, students must prioritize the course content, showing how one or two concepts or terms lead to an understanding of the nature of the communication in the case. The key may be the failure of characters to disclose.

### ***Methods of Implementation***

A class session of two (at the maximum) can be used to discuss the communication problems in the case. The instructor needs to make the learning goal clear: *that the case serves as an extended illustration of many concepts covered in class and that the role of discussion is to understand and explain the communication in the case.*

A three step design works well in discussing a case. First, the instructor should have students discuss what they see as the "communication problems" in the case. Such problems should be expressed in layman's terms and written down on a newsprint pad or chalkboard for all to see. The statements can arise from the students' first reactions to the case and from their own experience. The instructor should attempt to keep students from engaging in too much analysis of why the problems occur until all the statements of problems have been exhausted.

Then, these problem statements should be grouped and organized so that some system emerges for classifying them. Here, students can use course content to help explain how and why the problems emerged. Here also the skills of using

the case method are essential. The instructor should take a facilitator's role, using questions to raise issues and clarify students' comments. The questions help students make connections between concepts. The instructor supplies the questions. The students arrive at reasonable answers which they express and defend.

A further step can then be for the class to generate ideas on how the analysis of the case might lead to a solution of the communication problems. The instructor might pick a particular scene in the case and ask students to suggest changes in the characters' communication behavior. The beauty of this approach is that it forces students (and teachers) to deal with the problems as they exist. That is, the class cannot say "The characters must trust each other." They must deal with dialogue which has led the characters to a lack of trust. Such an analysis will help students understand the components of the trust concept as they apply to a particular scene.

Finally, the instructor should be prepared to offer a brief summary which pulls together the analysis and advice offered during the class discussion. It is also the only time the instructor should take a dominant role in the classroom. This step is essential to learning. During a fast-paced discussion, not all students immediately understand how the diverse pieces of analysis fit together. A summary at the end of the class hour which incorporates student analysis into a whole will be especially helpful.

Writing assignments can easily be used to develop students' skills in analyzing cases. Writing assignments can be made prior to class discussion to help guarantee that they will come to class prepared to talk. Writing assignments can be made after class discussion of the case also.

In-class group reports about the case are another alternative. However, multiple reports on the same case can become highly repetitious without planning to deal with the case. Following the reports, the whole class can discuss the generalizations about communication which the reports reveal.

Some cautions when using novels and plays as cases in the basic course should be noted. Instructors would also be

advised to rotate the novels or plays over a series of semesters. The student grapevine works too well in supplying the information about what key concepts are most useful for each discussion or writing assignment. To work well, the case study method must force students to encounter a new situation and make sense of it on their own.

Preparing case studies creates additional time demands on instructors. One compensation is that the method becomes an opportunity for doing some reading outside traditional textbooks. It also becomes a means of seeing a set of material which may have been taught many times in a new way as a new problem in a new case is encountered.

The author has worked with this method in small classes. Some problems would exist in using this method in a multi-sectioned basic course where recitation sessions are covered by TAs. Training of the TAs in the case method would be mandatory.

Students may prefer the passive learning which occurs in lectures. Students could be introduced to the method slowly by having them analyze several shorter cases before taking on a full novel or play. The rationale behind the case method needs to be explained clearly to students. The basic speech communication course is an ideal setting to introduce students to a more active form of learning. The advantages of helping students develop their intellectual skills and realize the extent to which knowledge in communication is integrated would seem to offset these problems.

## **Summary**

This essay examined the rationale behind the case method as it applies to the basic course in communication. It suggested that a basic course which attempts to introduce students to a wide range of communication topics would be well served by the case method approach which uses novels and plays. It outlined the communication issues involved in two cases. Finally, specific advice for selecting and implementing novels and plays as case studies in the basic course is offered.

Students can learn the basics of communication by examining situations in which human interaction is described in detail. Furthermore, students can and should do more than memorize terms and lists of advice for communication behavior. The process of analyzing a case requires more than rote memory. The case method helps students make sense of their everyday communication encounters. Such knowledge will carry forward to the encounters they experience beyond the classroom and college. Before such application can occur, they need to understand the complexity of communication and how to deal with such complexity. In the process of dealing with a complex case, students refine their knowledge of course content while developing the wisdom to apply that information.

## References

- Corey, E. 1980. "Case Method Teaching." HBS Case Services, Harvard Business School.
- Dooley, A. and W. Skinner. 1977. "Casing Casemethod Methods." *Academy of Management Review*, no. 2.
- Gibson, H. 1954. "The Case Method in Human Relations." *Accent on Teaching*. S. French, ed. New York, NY: Harper.
- Hammond, J. 1980. "Learning by the Case Method." HBS Case Services, Harvard Business School.
- Hargrove, M. "The Case Method." HBS Case Services, Harvard Business School.
- Hatcher, J. n.d. "The Case Method: Its Philosophical and Educational Concept." HBS Case Services, Harvard Business School.
- Lee, I. 1954. *Customs and Crises in Communication*. New York, NY: Harper.

- Perry, W. Jr. 1970. *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Roth, P. 1959. *Goodbye, Columbus*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Williams, T. 1970. *The Glass Menagerie*. New Directions.
- Zalenick, A. and D. Moment. 1964. *Casebook on Interpersonal Behavior in Organizations*. New York, NY: Wiley.