Using the Case Method of Teaching to Promote Active Student Learning

The Case Method
Case method teaching offers creative, applied classroom exercises for students to explore real life situations and social problems, which are based on fictional scenarios. Cases promote student-centered and participatory learning: students must read about a case, assume a role, and practice resolving the issue put forward in a “case.” A main goal of case method teaching is for students to practice analysis and problem solving. Hence, students learn both class content and how to learn because they practice their knowledge while performing a case.

• “To learn something well, it helps to hear it, see it, ask questions about it, and discuss it with others. Above all, students need to ‘do it’” (Silverman 1996: ix).
• Case method teaching creates an interactive classroom, student-driven analysis, comprehension of sociological complexity, and strategic solutions (Foran 2001).
• Anarchist feminist sociological case method teaching challenges students to interrogate the structural violence of racism, (hetero)sexism, and capitalism (Kleinman & Copp 2009).

Case Study 1:
Beyond Slacktivism: Gender and the Global Economy

Abstract: This case is tailored to fit units on gender, free trade, and globalization with the aim of getting students to think more deeply about their choices as first-world consumers in the global economy and the more sophisticated and substantive forms their advocacy initiatives might take.

Context: An international conference is called in order to discuss the current garment industry crisis in Bangladesh and the recent disasters and resulting deaths. The agenda of the meeting will focus on issues of workers’ rights, safety regulations, corporate responsibilities, and trade regulations.

Student Roles: Garment employees, big box retailers, regional subcontractors, activist group: The Solidarity Center, pro-capitalism group: Bangladeshis for Business.

Case Study 2:
War on Drugs or War on Youth?

Abstract: As state prison budgets outpace educational spending in California and as educational inequity and racial segregation of public schools continues into the 21st century, communities are questioning the “War on Drugs,” the school-to-prison pipeline, and a range of punitive policies that target urban youth of color. Students explore key debates around educational and criminal justice policy and analyze alternatives to the punishment models they routinely experience in their schools and neighborhoods.

Context: Campus tensions rise as suspensions, truancy tickets, and detention rates increase at Los Angeles’ Salazar High School. Campus and neighborhood police are collaborating with administrators to discipline students, resulting in falling graduation rates and higher youth arrest rates. The neighborhood gang injunction is also causing police interference as students walk to school together. Problems of bullying, violence, and drug possession at Salazar do exist, and students and teachers call a meeting to explore a different model for addressing them. They invite their city councilperson, school principal, and teachers who support existing disciplinary policies.

Characters: Students proposing restorative justice policies; the principal; teachers who support restorative justice; teachers who support punitive policies; an LA city councilperson.

Case Study 3:
Gentrification Versus the Livable City

Abstract: This case focuses on a fictional urban neighborhood undergoing gentrification where the longer-term, predominantly working class, Latino residents face the influx of artists, young urban professionals, and boutique businesses. These longer-term residents embrace the neighborhood improvements but are also experiencing new oppressions. Role-playing students will come together in a town hall meeting to explore alternative ways to make urban community and ways to stave off the oppressive relations of gentrification.

Context: Washington Heights is a beautiful historical and Latino neighborhood nestled in a busy and expanding metropolitan region. Given its history, culture, and proximity to the metro region’s downtown, a new class of urban professionals have chosen to locate there. Gentrification has resulted in city beautification projects, easier access to fresh foods, improved public transportation, and more of a police presence. Some improvements have been welcomed in this once neglected community; yet there is concern over rising property values and rents, the imposition of historical zoning laws, and the increase in police harassment. Tensions are rising so community organizers have called a town hall meeting to see if residents can organize for a livable community for all.

Student roles: Longer term residents, the new professional class residents, older business owners, new boutique business owners, a city councilor, the police, a community organizer (moderator).

Case Study 4:
Reparations for Slavery: Is it Time?

Abstract: In 2003, Brown University formed a Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice to investigate a possible relationship between the university’s endowment and the transatlantic slave trade. This case study asks students to consider a similar investigation into the link between the transatlantic slave trade and the establishment of their U.S. university. Is it time to seriously consider reparations for slavery based on the results of the investigation?

Context: Following Brown University’s lead, the university administration feels compelled to understand the university’s complicated history with people of African descent. However, not everyone supports this investigation. The administrators have agreed to a town hall meeting to discuss the rationale for conducting this research and to give concerned individuals an opportunity to ask questions or express their dissent to the proposed research. At its conclusion, the administration will make their final decision.

Student Roles: University President or Chancellor, an alum who supports the proposal, an alum who strongly disagrees with the proposal, current students witnessing the racial tension on campus due to the proposal.