

Making Case Discussions Work

Maria Elizabeth M. Grageda

National Teacher Training Center for the Health Professions, University of the Philippines Manila

ABSTRACT

Case discussions are one of the most common teaching-learning activities being utilized in the education of health professionals. Despite this fact, many teachers are still not equipped with the proper skills needed in the conduct of successful case discussions. They still have uncertainties on how to go about preparing for and conducting case discussions with their students. This article hopes to provide readers with an understanding of the basic concepts related to case discussion, and provide practical tips on how to conduct case discussions useful for both the health professions educators and students. The advantages of case discussions in the development of critical thinking, reasoning, and decision-making, and its versatility of application, whether in small or large group settings, classroom or clinical settings, and for varying levels of students, make it a very viable teaching-learning activity in the unstructured environment of health professionals. Seven practical tips for teachers are given to help in the preparation, planning, and conduct of case discussions. It also emphasizes the role of teacher as participant, guide, and evaluator during case discussions.

Key Words: *case discussion, case method, small group learning, clinical education*

Case discussions are one of the most common teaching-learning activities being utilized for the education of health professionals in both the classroom and in clinical settings. It is useful in various community-based educational activities as well. Though commonly used, its potential for stimulating higher order thinking has not been fully maximized by most classroom, clinical, and community educators. Oftentimes, teachers are not adequately trained

and prepared to assume their crucial role during the discussion.¹ This article hopes to provide readers with an understanding of the basic concepts related to case discussion, and provide practical tips in conducting case discussions useful for both health professions educators and students.

There are several concepts and strategies commonly related to case discussion such as case-based teaching, case method, case presentation, case report, and case studies. It is important to note that case discussion is the activity that lies at the core of a bigger curricular concept called *case-based teaching*. This includes any method of instruction that focuses on the use of cases as either part of or as central focus of the curriculum. Under case-based teaching is what is called the *case method*, which is the practice of using cases as pedagogical tools. All other strategies such as *case presentations*, *case reports*, and *case studies* are examples of the use of the case method. All of these strategies utilize cases as tools, but they have different methods and procedures. What is common to all these strategies, and in any other strategies using cases as teaching tools, is that all of these involve *case discussion* (Figure 1).

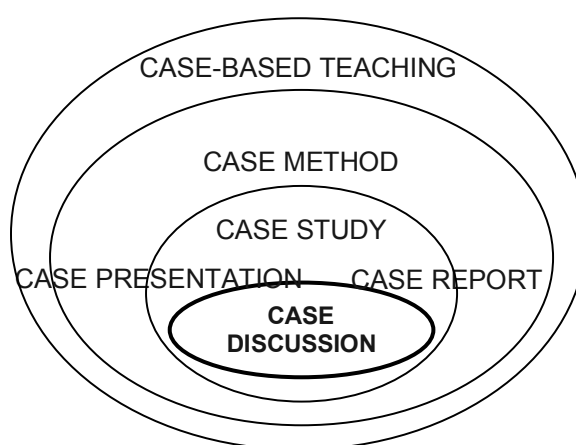


Figure 1. Case discussion within case-based teaching

Case discussion is very effective in the ill-structured domains of health professionals. Clinical practice presents very unpredictable conditions that can be simulated in case discussions. It is also a good venue for encouraging group and social interactions through a healthy exchange of ideas, not only between the teacher and the students, but also between the students themselves.² This way, everyone

Presented at the 6th National Conference on Health Professions Education "Traditions, Trends and Targets in Health Professions Education", January 19, 2010, Traders Hotel Manila.

Corresponding author: Maria Elizabeth M. Grageda, PTRP, MHPEd
National Teacher Training Center for the Health Professions
University of the Philippines Manila
3/F Joaquin Gonzales Hall Padre Faura St. corner Ma. Orosa St.
Ermita, Manila, Philippines 1000
Telephone: +632 5210899
Telefax : +632 5264259
Email: memgrageda@post.upm.edu.ph

contributes to the final output at the end of the discussion. There are multiple advantages in the use of case discussion. Case discussion as an activity provides flexibility in several dimensions. It may be used in any group size. Even large groups can be divided into smaller groups.³ It can be used in any setting, whether in the classroom, the clinics, and even in the community. Students at any level can also benefit from case discussion. The level of complexity of the cases can easily be matched to the level of the students, and the depth of discussion can also be adjusted depending on the learning objectives that have been set. Case discussions may also be used to begin teaching-learning sessions to introduce a theme or concept, may serve as the main body of the teaching-learning session, or as a summary to end and show relationships between several concepts presented at the beginning of the session. Its only disadvantages are the need for more time to conduct it, and the need for well trained facilitators/teachers.⁴ Successful conduct of case discussions involves teachers with the capacity for extensive planning and with effective facilitation skills.

What health professions teachers should remember regarding case discussion is that:

- There is no correct approach to case discussions – the approach will depend largely on the learning context wherein case discussion is being used;
- The case discussion style varies between teachers, students, and cases – you will not find two case discussions whose processes and outcomes are exactly the same. Each case discussion will be different, due to the varying styles of teaching that the educators bring to the discussion. It is also rendered unique by the composition of students participating in the discussion, and the type of cases being used as tools for discussion.
- A large group can be broken down into small groups – Interaction during case discussion is increased with a manageable-sized group that is not too small and not too large as well. A very small group ensures participation of all members, but diminishes the variety of contributions to the output. On the other hand, a large group ensures variety of contributions, but decreases the chances for participation of all members.
- Shared leadership is important – The process of ensuring that all members of the group contributes to the output of the case discussion is largely the responsibility of the teacher/facilitator. But all members also have a shared responsibility to ensure balance between talking and listening as the discussion progresses. This ensures that each member of the group is able to give equal contribution to the output.
- A mixture of experts and novices help – A good mix of students at varying levels help in establishing the depth of the discussion. In the course of the discussion, both

novices and experts are given opportunities to exchange ideas and learn from each other.

- Enhancing clinical reasoning skills is the focus – The main focus in the conduct of a case discussion is providing the students an opportunity to apply their clinical reasoning skills. There are really no right or wrong answers. What is important is the ability of the students to present a sound basis for their ideas, contributions, and positions.
- The teacher plays three roles: as participant, guide, and evaluator – The teacher is a participant in the discussion, but must not dominate the discussion. The teacher dominating the discussion can convert the case discussion into a lecture. The teacher is a guide and serves to facilitate the discussion process. The teacher chooses and prepares the cases and ensures that the objectives are met as the discussion progresses. The teacher also plays the role of an evaluator. It is the teacher who evaluates how each student has performed in the conduct of the case discussion. The teacher takes note, not only of the quantity of contribution, but most importantly, the quality of contributions of each student in the group.

With all these in mind, health professions teachers should strive to work towards a successful case discussion. Here are seven practical tips which may help teachers improve planning, preparation, and conduct of successful case discussions.

Practical Tip#1

Set the stage by setting mutual objectives and learning about the case and the students.

Making the objectives known to the participants is very important. Learning outcomes must be made clear to all the participants so that it will be easier to steer the discussion towards the expected output. The teacher/facilitator should study the case to be used very well prior to the discussion so that important aspects of the case that needs to be emphasized may be given proper attention. This will also help the teacher prepare for various possible ideas that may arise from the case. Knowing the case well diminishes the level of unpredictability up to a certain degree. As a teacher, it will also be very helpful to get to know your students before beginning the case discussion.⁵ It is important that teachers are aware of certain characteristics of the participants, their academic background, some ideas on their previous knowledge base and experiences, and their attitudes toward the topic and toward case discussion. All these information will be very helpful so that the teacher will come into the case discussion fully prepared.

Practical Tip #2

Choose cases that are substantive and complex. The case should represent problems, dilemmas and complexities that are based on realistic encounters.

The case is an essential tool in case discussions. It serves as an instructional focus, around which the discussion will come from and revolve around. Important concepts needing emphasis also spring from the case. That is why it is very important that the choice of cases for discussion be appropriate to the expected learning outcomes. Case discussions aim to stimulate critical thinking and reasoning of the participants. The cases should therefore do just that. It should not be too simple that everything needed to produce the output is already given. On the other hand, cases that are too complex, making it impossible to come up with the expected output based on what was given, might not be too helpful as well. Cases should be substantive enough to merit discussion and exchange of ideas. Cases which present dilemmas and problems are best as they allow a variety of possible responses and approaches to arrive at a decision. It is also important that the cases be as realistic as possible. This will help prepare the students for possible problems that they will encounter in future practice.

Practical Tip #3

Mimic the thinking process that takes place with real patients. Identify a decision-making juncture and determine what information is available, what other information is needed, and the problems at that time.

The case is there to stimulate thinking, but the skills of the teacher in facilitating and guiding the discussion is crucial in sustaining this stimulus throughout the discussion. It is important that the students go through the process of arriving at ideas and decisions in the same process that experts go through when dealing with patients and situations in the actual practice of the profession. This is why case discussions take time. Ideas have to go through a process of presentation, deliberation, debate, and discussion before a group decision is arrived at.

Practical Tip #4

Encourage students to generate hypotheses. Provide initial cues and let students determine what other information is needed. Give them time to reformulate hypotheses and discuss how they came up with their respective hypotheses.

Allow students to contribute their own individual hypotheses regarding the case. Provide them an opportunity to present their ideas to the group and present the basis upon which this idea was arrived at. This kind of sharing exposes all the participants to various perspectives and approaches to solving the same problem. It helps widen the way they look at problems and situations. This practice also helps students appreciate the diversity of ideas, and

develop respect, sensitivity, and tolerance for others' opinions.

Practical Tip #5

Encourage thoroughness and expansive thinking. This can be done by asking more probing questions, redirecting questions, and looking for opportunities for establishing relationships.

This is the crucial task of the teacher/facilitator. Asking the right questions that will help students through the process of arriving at sound decisions, and responding appropriately to student responses and contributions is a skill that teachers using case discussions should really try to develop. Teachers should strive to improve on their ability to formulate good questions that can help stimulate and sustain critical thinking processes. Listening skills are very important as well. Case discussion facilitators should be very good listeners to pick up salient points raised in the discussion. Students should also be given the opportunity to ask questions, directed not only to the teacher, but to each other as well. Listening skills are also important to develop in students. The ability to listen to others' ideas is a skill which will be very useful in future practice.

Practical Tip #6

Utilize other participatory techniques such as role playing, demonstration, and interactive videos or computer programs.

Like any other teaching-learning strategy, the case discussion can be injected with other participatory techniques. Demonstrations, role playing, and video presentations can be done to either present the case or present their hypotheses, approaches, and proposed solutions. These techniques help further increase the level of participation of the students and compliment the psychomotor and affective domains, and not just the cognitive domain. Introduction of these techniques also adds to the novelty of the activity so that there is variety within several discussions.

Practical Tip #7

Provide a summary. Highlight key points raised or go back to the objectives. Make sure to close with positive feedback.

In any teaching-learning activity, the final summary is always important because it highlights very important concepts raised during the case discussion. It helps the students pick out relevant concepts that the group was able to come up with which contributed to achieving the objectives set at the beginning of the discussion. It gives the students a sense of closure and accomplishment. During the summary, feedback could also be given to the group as to the quality of discussion that has transpired and how these can be improved in future case discussions.

In summary, there are two important points one should remember in conducting case discussions. First, is that case discussion is the key to effective case-based teaching. Using cases as tools for instruction does not stop at just presenting the case or just reading about it on your own. Effective case based-teaching using the case-method is utilizing these cases in actual discussions where interaction between students and the teacher, and among themselves is achieved, thus enhancing critical thinking and decision-making in students. Second, is that for case discussions to be effective, teachers should play their three-fold role of participant, guide, and evaluator. The role of the teacher in a case discussion is very crucial. Adequate preparation of teachers for this three-fold role cannot be over emphasized.

References

1. Nasmith L, McAlpine L, Franco ED. Teaching by case discussion: a faculty development intervention. *Med Teach.* 1995;17(4):419-30.
2. Boehrer J, Linsky M. Teaching with cases: learning to question. In: Svinicki MD, ed. *The Changing Face of College Teaching: New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 42. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 1990.
3. Stein M, Neill P, Houston S. Case discussion in clinical pharmacology: application of small group teaching methods to a large group. *Med Teach.* 1990;12(2):193-6.
4. Davies IK. *Instructional technique*. Washington: Mc Graw-Hill Inc., 1981. p.42.
5. Florida State Universities Small Group Learning and Facilitation Resources. Baker D. Tips for leading a case discussion [Online]. 2008 [cited 2010 Jan]. Available from <http://med.fsu.edu/education/facultydevelopment>.