CASE TEACHING

How Hollywood Inspires My Case Teaching

3 Cinema-Influenced Principles for Writing and Selecting Engaging Cases

by Neil J. Lambert

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Much has been written about the effectiveness—or [what some call the "magic"](#)—of case-based learning. Cases expose learners to real-world problem-solving, whether through paper-based, live, or multimedia formats. In addition to providing students with opportunities to apply theory to real-life situations, to foster critical thinking, and to practice decision-making and taking action, case-based learning offers opportunities for developing essential meta-skills, which are long-lasting abilities to learn new things quicker and more effectively.

While a compelling case does require rich empirical details and facts, my experience in both writing cases and selecting ones for teaching shows that effectively immersing a learner in a case requires effective engagement management, which often requires compelling storytelling. Where better to look for inspiration than the veritable experts of it —Hollywood filmmakers.

When writing or selecting cases, I know how easy it can be to get lost in the nitty-gritty details of a case and effectively lose sight of its story. So I share with you here three Hollywood-inspired principles to help you tell compelling stories through cases that your students will continue thinking about even after your class: the value of empathy, the three-act structure, and the art of keeping an audience guessing.

1. The Value of Empathy

For renowned film critic, historian, and journalist [Roger Ebert](#), "[…] if it's a great movie, it lets you understand a little bit more about what it's like to be a different gender, a different race, a different age, a different economic class, a different nationality, a different profession, [or have] different hopes, aspirations, dreams, and fears. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us. And that, to me, is the most noble thing that a good movie can do."

Ebert's description of empathy in filmmaking also applies to the making of a good case. Whether focused on an explicit or implicit decision that a central protagonist has to make, a case should enable learners to understand what it's like to be in the presented scenario and to identify—and empathize—with the people sharing their experiences and journey. Otherwise, I find that learners can become disengaged with the case, regardless of how well-written or researched it may be.

Rather than simply looking in from the outside, I often ask learners to place themselves in the shoes of our protagonist(s) in the cases I select and write. This is a common approach, you might say. But more than merely posing learners questions along the lines of *What would you do?* or *What would you have done?* I have found value in (re-)structuring and presenting available case materials to my students in different ways from how they were originally presented or outlined in available teaching notes. For example, I might stagger or reorder the release of case details or provide additional information or data to reflect the reality and journey of the protagonist(s) more effectively, including (where appropriate) additional information on the issue, event, or protagonists involved.

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Besides fostering students' understanding of what it is like to be the protagonist(s) in the presented case context and how that perspective differs from their own personal or professional reality, developing such empathy provides valuable experiential learning opportunities as learners navigate a protagonist's journey themselves and look to understand, analyze, and respond to presented conditions in the case.

I often find this learner empathy apparent in their post-session questions: *What happened next? Do you know what became of the protagonist(s)? Is there another part to the case?* When I hear these questions, I know that students have engaged with a case through their empathy with the protagonist(s) and curiosity in subsequent events and outcomes.

2. The Three-Act Structure

The three-act structure—not merely having a beginning, a middle, and an end, but rather a setup, a confrontation, and a resolution—is considered one of the most fundamental aspects of filmmaking, not necessarily as a prescribed formula, but because of what it represents: the art of good storytelling. Before a filmmaker does anything else, they must be able to tell a story.

Thus, a good story is at the heart of any good film, and the three-act structure is a mechanism to help sharpen it. One thing must lead to another and then another, uniting and providing the semblance of a story by bringing cohesion to otherwise random events, meaning, and outcomes.

The same applies to a case. I find that a good case ultimately tells a compelling story, for which this principle helps sharpen the story's telling, anchor the story, and ensure that no one loses sight of what they are doing. Without this, a case's story can be lost or become obscure, particularly when building complexity and providing rich details and real-world insights.

In his book _Screenplay_, American author and screenwriter Syd Field labeled these three acts the setup, the confrontation, and the resolution. But what do these each entail, and why is this structure necessary?

Act One: The setup (or beginning) introduces the who, where, and when. It identifies the primary protagonist(s) or hero(es), their circumstances, goals, and ambitions, and the possible obstacles or challenges they face for achieving these. Indicating what the story is about, such as the transformation likely to take place, the setup also identifies a catalyst—an inciting incident (i.e., call to action)—that will propel our hero into the unknown. If a story lacks setup, the audience can lack the necessary context, empathy, and understanding to engage with it.

A lack of proper setup in a case can leave students without the necessary understanding and conviction about why they are doing what they are doing. And this can understandably stifle empathy and engagement as students merely go through the motions of the exercise.

Act Two: The confrontation (or build) raises the stakes for the primary protagonist(s) to achieve their goals and ambitions, escalating their conflict. In a case, this means throwing in several different challenges and obstacles, adding layers, introducing new dimensions or scenarios (e.g., subplots or secondary characters), and building details, complexity, or indeed a sense of uncertainty and perhaps despair if so desired—what screenwriters call "hitting rock bottom" or the "darkest hour." Can and will our hero(es) go on?

When writing and selecting cases, I find value in remembering that this act is where the immersive experience for learners is built and their journey unfolds. If the story a case is telling lacks confrontation, it can be unengaging and uninteresting, leaving learners to ask, So what? Alternatively, without a sufficient setup (Act One), such escalations can, unfortunately, see learners lose sight of the primary protagonist(s) and their journey, thus impacting engagement and discovery.

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On the other hand, I have also seen the dangers of building complexity too early or too quickly, not allowing learners sufficient time to digest, explore, and navigate all aspects of the story. In my experience, understanding the purpose and importance of this act and its relationships with the two other acts helps to develop (and, if necessary, clarify and refine)

the story the case is telling while considering the best way for this to unfold given the intended learning experience and outcomes.

Act Three: The resolution (or payoff) resolves the story through either the achievement of a goal and ambition or failure. If a story lacks a resolution, an audience may leave disgruntled, unfulfilled, and feeling like their time was wasted. Therefore, this act must resolve the story, tie up any loose ends, answer critical issues or questions introduced in the setup (Act One), and conclude the transformation undertaken by the primary protagonist(s).

Like many practitioners of case-based learning, I seek to elicit inquisitive mindsets in my students by encouraging them to reflect, pose questions, and search for (alternative) solutions and explanations to developments within a case. Indeed, effective resolutions that tie up loose ends and conclude the transformation within a case do not curtail this. Instead, they provide the basis for important reflections on and critical discussions of actions, events, and outcomes in the case, valuable takeaways, and the learning experience.

3. The Art of Keeping the Audience Guessing

In filmmaking, exploiting an audience's curiosity facilitates engagement by making them care enough to want to know what happens next and thus keep watching. It also builds anticipation and excitement toward the final resolution (Act Three).

Likewise, while I experience first-hand the value of "diagnostic" cases requiring the tracking of events, processes, and actions leading to a known case outcome, I also see the engagement and learning benefits of more free-flowing cases that keep learners guessing

and curious—i.e., keeping the case outcome(s) out of reach until necessary. Which type to use ultimately depends on the intended learning experience and outcomes.

To be clear, I am not advocating for a twist or unexpected resolution. Instead, I include case outcomes and identifiers in teaching notes or in later slides to be deployed when the time is right ("the big reveal"), i.e., once learners have worked through the issues presented in the case themselves, thereby enabling them to compare their judgments, conclusions, and decisions with those of the protagonists.

Redacting or anonymizing aspects of the case, or indeed purposely writing or selecting real-world yet anonymized cases, also mitigates possible "spoilers" in this regard, particularly when students become preoccupied with [finding out case outcomes](#) beforehand.

The principle of keeping learners guessing complements the idea of inviting and embracing more student participation in case discussion. When more students offer potential solutions to a case dilemma, the class has more opportunities to consider alternative outcomes, working collaboratively to suggest and decide how the story might advance. Thus, I find that the timing and channeling of student solutions and the value they offer is the crucial issue.

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Additionally, accepting and channeling various student solutions in this way also presents opportunities for gamification and experiential learning during "the build" in Act Two. I often use manual polling (e.g., hand or card raising) or electronic polls to demonstrate similar, different, or changing judgments, decisions, and actions between and by individuals or groups as the case proceeds. Depending on how open I want this process to be, I may present the class with a selection of predetermined action or solution choices to vote on, often repeating the vote once I have added layers with additional information or data. On other occasions, I may ask groups to advocate for possible actions or solutions, then have the class to vote on them. It also depends on the nature of the case.

These opportunities are in addition to those presented for learner discovery, reflection, and self-evaluation through the timely revelation of an actual case outcome in the big reveal, allowing learners to discover for themselves before comparing and contrasting their judgments, decisions, and actions with those of the case protagonist(s). Thus, comparing vote results with subsequently revealed actual case outcomes has proven to be very beneficial in stimulating student reflections and self-evaluation.

As a self-confessed, card-carrying [evil teacher](), I find that keeping learners guessing and curious in this manner helps in building the confrontation (Act Two) through layering, enhancing complexity, or indeed uncertainty or despair—aspects otherwise curtailed with known case outcomes, thereby impacting learner immersion, engagement, and learning experience.

A Case Strategy to Capture Your Students' Attention

My aim here is not to prescribe a template or set approach to case writing or selection. Instead, I strive to share what I've learned about writing and selecting cases that have been inspired by these Hollywood principles. Alongside the presentation of rich empirical details and real-world experiences, a case must tell a compelling story and achieve the required immersive experience.

I invite readers to consider how these principles of storytelling could enhance your own case teaching practice. Could understanding the value of learners' identification and empathy with protagonists and the journey they are sharing enhance engagement in the cases that you select and write? Could the three-act-structure enhance cohesion and clarity in your building of rich and compelling stories through your cases, and in developing a palpable sense of curiosity and anticipation as you keep your audience guessing up until the big reveal?

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Dr. Neil J. Lambert is a senior lecturer in global management at the University of Bristol Business School, United Kingdom. A senior fellow of the Higher Education Academy, a Chartered Management and Business Educator, and a member of the British Academy of Management, he has written cases, developed educational games, and taught using case- and game-based learning across undergraduate, graduate, and executive education.

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