

Building Relevancy and Engagement through Case-Based Learning in English Studies

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Abstract

This critical reflection, motivated by a comprehensive program review and the opportunity to teach a new course, explores issues of relevance and engagement in English Studies. Arguing for instructional methods that meet our current challenges, the author shares her experience with case-based learning in a graduate level English Language Study course. The course utilized real-life cases to teach advanced linguistics, encourage critical thinking, and show students the ways linguistics can be used to address everyday problems. A specific example of a case is presented. Feedback from students evidenced a high level of relevancy and engagement. The article also highlights the importance of scaffolding and collaboration in implementing case-based learning successfully.

Introduction

In the Fall of 2022, I was tasked with conducting a comprehensive program review of our undergraduate major—an assignment many of us receive in advance of an accreditation visit or the latest program prioritization trend. This is usually the kind of task I complete solely to fulfill an external requirement, not as part of my reflective teaching practice. But this time was different. While I knew national trends indicate that over the last 10 years the number of English majors has dropped by over a third, it was still striking to see the downward trend lines for my own department in the charts attached to the review template I was handed.

I pictured the students I work with currently teaching in the K-12 system, laboring as Teaching Assistants in our department, or planning to become teachers—all graduating into a world where the Humanities seem to matter less and less. Within this context I debated how to answer program review questions such as:

- How is the curriculum relevant to the needs of students?
- What are the major challenges facing the degree program?
- What are the plans to overcome the challenges faced by the program?

As I reflected on these questions, a parallel debate emerged for me about how to best address these issues within my own classroom. Everywhere I looked I saw challenges and opportunities students graduating with an English degree were uniquely situated to address, especially in the age of generative AI. Why didn't more students, and society at large, see this, too?

Nathan Heller's (2023) widely circulated *New Yorker* article, "The End of the English Major," offers some clues. Among them was the perspective from one of the students he interviewed: "'I think the problem for the humanities is you can feel like you're not really going anywhere, and that's very scary,' he said. 'You write one essay better than the other from one semester to the next. That's not the same as, you know, being able to solve this economics problem, or code this thing, or do policy analysis.'"

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Relevancy and Engagement

The issues this student raises—that is the issues of *relevancy and engagement*—aren’t new. Recent efforts to address relevancy and engagement in English Studies have focused on expanding the canon and incorporating digital studies—important steps, to be sure. Although clearly not enough as these issues have long required more of us as a discipline.

For example, in 2000 Gad Yair published “Educational Battlefields in America: The Tug-of-War over Students’ Engagement with Instruction.” Yair relied on data collected in 1993 from the Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development (Bidwell et al., 1992). This study utilized the Experience Sampling Method (Hektner et al., 2007) and included 865 K-12 students across the United States. These students provided data on 28,193 daily experiences Yair filtered to focus on moments of instruction, resulting in a sample of 4,058 learning experiences.

Yair (2000) found that student engagement with instruction differed significantly in relation to instructional method *and* subject. Not surprisingly, rates of engagement were highest during laboratories and group work focused on active problem solving. Rates of engagement were also highest during math and science courses and lowest in English (62.8% vs. 48%). As alluded to by the student quoted earlier, writing ever better essays is not, *or is not perceived to be*, the same as actively solving an economics problem or developing policy analysis.

In short, we need to do a much better job of providing students with relevant and engaging instruction that they perceive as meeting the demands of our current moment.

Course Context

I had an opportunity to address this challenge not only because of the comprehensive review of my program but also because I had been assigned a new graduate level class, English Language Study. The general purpose of this class is to provide students with an advanced linguistics background that will support their future endeavors as teachers and graduate students. I began by asking not only what I wanted my students to learn but also what I wanted them to be able to do after taking this class.

Of course, after this class I wanted my students to be able to apply the principles and practices of linguistics in addressing pedagogical issues in their own classrooms. But I also wanted them to be able to use the tools of linguistics to solve complex problems outside the classroom. And I wanted to offer them a pedagogical model they might employ in their own classrooms to increase relevancy and engagement with the Humanities. These goals first led me to Problem-Based Learning (PBL)—a method familiar to many K-12 teachers. While I appreciate the attention placed on solving real-world problems with a focus on the problem-solving process itself, PBL leaves too much to chance in terms of the actual subject-matter content learned, time required for learning, and small group dynamics that might impede learning. Indeed, in a comparative study of PBL at two medical schools, the relatively unstructured, open inquiry method of PBL was preferred by only 11% of the students and 16% of the faculty (Srinivasan et al., 2007). What was overwhelmingly preferred was Case-Based Learning—a guided inquiry method that is over 100 years old but largely ignored in English Studies outside of professional and technical writing courses.

Case-Based Learning and Teaching

Case study teaching is a highly participatory instructional method. It demands much of the teacher. I had to learn how to write cases, lead case-based discussions, orient students to a pedagogical approach completely new to them and, specifically, teach students how to both participate in case-based discussions and write case reports. Fortunately, there are some excellent

resources available including Naumes and Naumes's (2015) *The Art and Craft of Case Writing*, Ellet's (2018) *The Case Study Handbook*, and The Christensen Center for Teaching and Learning (n.d.). However, these materials are written for business school students and faculty. As I learned by actively engaging my students in this pedagogical experiment, several adaptations were needed to be effective for English Studies. For example, beginning the course with an overview of the theory and practice of case-based learning and a simulation designed to prepare students for how we would work together, the joint development of rubrics for both the cases and discussions, guided peer review of the case reports, and basic instruction in how to read educational statistics.

Cases typically tell the story of a real-life decision-maker who is grappling with a question or problem in need of a solution. The context for the question or problem needs to be described in some detail. Supporting data, ranging from government reports, academic articles, videos, news clips, case law and more, need to be woven into the story. Because I wanted the study of our cases to provide students with the same level of subject-matter content in linguistics they would have received in a more traditional instructional format, our cases incorporated a carefully curated set of readings. Our first case centered on the decision by a high school principal in Tennessee's Memphis-Shelby School District, where a majority of students read below grade level, to require explicit phonics instruction across the curriculum (Mervosh, 2022). Students were asked to consider the complexity of this issue and then argue whether or not the principal of Oakhaven High School made the right decision. Doing so required background knowledge of phonics, phonetics, and the general science of reading as well as an understanding of the political and socioeconomic context in which the decision was made. Students were presented material that included everything from newspaper articles to formal linguistics instruction (print and video), to National Assessment of Educational Progress reports. Our other cases included consideration of whether or not the editor of *Science* made the right decision in instituting a complete ban on the use of generative AI for its research articles (semantics, pragmatics, syntax), whether or not the UAE made the right decision in instituting English as the primary mode of instruction in government schools (functional systemic linguistics and World Englishes), and whether or not a court case where the decision rested on competing interpretations of a specific emoji was correctly decided (sociolinguistics, forensic linguistics).

But before we could begin the first case, we had to orient ourselves. We did so using the Everest Simulation offered by Harvard Business Publishing (Nichols & Wright, 2015). The Everest Simulation is an award-winning tool designed to enhance student learning in group dynamics and leadership using the context of a Mount Everest expedition. Participants assume one of five roles within a team, working together through various scenarios to decide whether to advance to the next camp, aiming to reach the summit. Like case-based learning, this simulation requires a high degree of collaboration, the ability to think through complicated issues, and effective decision-making processes—especially in the face of opposing interests and asymmetrical information. Using this simulation gave us a chance to explore group dynamics, communication, cognitive biases, psychological safety, and other aspects of central importance to case-based learning.

Following the simulation, students were asked to study our first case in preparation for our discussion. The case-based discussion is graded. Jointly developing a rubric and attaching a grade to the case discussions reinforced not only the importance of being prepared for discussion but also helped provide a level of structure and guidance we often assume students have already internalized even though that may not be true. Discussions were graded using three criteria: Knowledge/Breadth of Understanding, Critical Thought and Extension, and Leadership and Teamwork. While the first two are familiar criteria, the last one is less so. Leadership and

Teamwork involves an assessment of the degree to which a student actively engages others by inviting comments and feedback, constructively challenging the accuracy and relevance of statements made by others and drawing critical conclusions while avoiding attempts to “overpower” other students.

It is important to note the role of the teacher during case-based discussions. In case-based discussions, the teacher primarily facilitates and guides the discussion, ensuring that it is productive and engaging for all students. The teacher poses thought-provoking questions, encourages diverse perspectives, steers the conversation to cover key constructs, and helps students apply theoretical concepts to the real-world scenario presented in the case. Additionally, the teacher may provide summaries or clarifications as needed. This required me not to be prepared with a set of lecture notes for each class, but rather to be prepared with a set of guiding questions that both encouraged thoughtful discussion and ensured students understood key concepts.

After each discussion session(s), students completed a case report. The report varies a bit depending on the type of case but usually requires the following:

1. Brief overall evaluation (concise description of the situation and a position statement);
2. Evaluative criteria applied in developing your position (explain the criteria you used in reaching your decision);
3. Evidence provided to support your evaluation;
4. Discussion of any major contingencies or counterarguments;
5. Action plan that considers short and long-term actions that bear on your position.

(Ellet, 2018)

As mentioned earlier, jointly constructing rubrics for the cases and workshopping drafts of cases, which I found little parallel to in Business literature, helped us align this teaching method with English Studies.

Aligning case-based learning with my objectives for graduate level study of linguistics fostered these particular outcomes in more effective ways than more common teaching methods:

- Critical Thinking and Analysis: Case studies focused on complex issues like language acquisition, sociolinguistics, or computational linguistics problems. This fosters students' critical thinking by analyzing linguistic data, identifying patterns, proposing hypotheses and supporting or challenging proposed solutions.
- Practical Application of Knowledge: By working through real-life scenarios, students see how linguistic theories apply to situations such as language teaching, natural language processing, or language policy planning. This helps align learning with outcomes aimed at applying linguistic knowledge to solve practical problems.
- Communication Skills: Discussing case studies as a group improves students' academic and professional communication skills. This includes articulating arguments, engaging in scholarly debate, and presenting linguistic information clearly.
- Ethical Considerations and Cultural Sensitivity: Cases help students explore the ethical implications of linguistic research and language policy as well as develop cultural competence.

Student Perceptions and Future Practice

I was fortunate to find such a willing group of collaborators in my graduate students. Their openness to case-based learning was motivated in large part by their dedication to their own

students and deep desire to meet the challenges of our current moment. Feedback solicited throughout the semester evidenced the high degree of relevancy and engagement experienced by students. Anonymous feedback in end-of-term student evaluations show that this approach to case-based learning holds promise for the Humanities:

- I thought the case report model was an interesting way to connect course material to real-world problems. I also really liked the Everest Simulation - it was a great way to build community and work as a team with my fellow grad students.
- I really enjoyed the case studies as a whole and think the topics you chose were pertinent and interesting. In general I really enjoyed the class and found it to be rigorous, interesting, and extremely applicable, as well as an interesting way to explore linguistics through application.
- Absolutely love the structure of this course! The instructor created an atmosphere that cultivated psychological safety. . . . a comfortable environment to ask questions and take risks. Additionally, I really enjoyed learning about issues that are impacting people and policies that we are confronted with today.
- The case study report format was one of the first templates/organizing methods that has truly resonated with me. . . . I appreciate you implementing this type of assignment into English studies, as it has real world application.

There are several matters to consider as I expand my teaching practice to include more case-based learning. For example, I underestimated how long it takes to write high quality cases as well as how difficult it was for some students to transfer their skills to this new learning environment. I also learned that it is very easy to build cases that are unwieldy in terms of both the amount of reading and background knowledge required, leading to frustration on the part of students when the challenge of the case is too high. As I continue to develop my ability to write high quality cases, I will focus specifically on providing sufficient scaffolding for this type of learning as well as more accurately assessing the time and effort required of students for each case.

I'm also eager to work with others to expand case-based learning within English studies in particular and Humanities in general. Professional writing courses lend themselves well to case-based learning. For example, teachers could present a scenario where a company is facing a technical crisis or risk, such as a product recall or a data breach. Students might assess decisions made concerning press releases, FAQs, and communication plans to stakeholders, aligning with outcomes related to ethical communication, crisis management, and public relations writing. In a Literature course we might present students with a case focusing on a character's decision or a pivotal plot point within a work of literature. Students can analyze the motivations, cultural contexts, and consequences of these literary elements, proposing alternative outcomes or decisions based on textual and historical evidence.

In short, there are many ways case-based learning might help change perceptions of students in the Humanities as doing little more than writing one paper better than the other from one semester to the next.

ASSIGNMENT

Reading Across the Curriculum: High School Phonics Instruction

Our class met once a week on campus. The first case, which was relatively complicated, unfolded over the course of four weeks:

- Week 1: Brief Introduction to Phonics, Phonology, and the Science of Reading (both linguistics research and recent legislative actions across the country)
- Week 2: Case Discussion (again, this is graded and requires significant preparation—see rubric below)
- Week 3: Drafting/Peer Review
- Week 4: Case Report (final drafts/individual conferences)

Case #1: Reading Across the Curriculum: High School Phonics Instruction

Do you remember learning to read? Do you remember any books you liked to read when you were in third grade? Perhaps a parent or guardian remembers (ask if you have a chance)? Even if you don't remember any particular books, the fact that you are in graduate school today suggests that by the time you were in third grade you were considered a proficient or excellent reader because it turns out that what you were doing in third grade matters a whole lot!

It's important for students to read at grade level by third grade because reading is a foundational skill that is necessary for academic success in all subjects. Students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade are at a higher risk of falling behind and struggling in school (e.g. [Duncan, et al. 2007](#) and [Rabiner et al. 2016](#)). Additionally, research has shown that students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade are also more likely to drop out of high school ([Hernandez, 2012](#)). In general, phonological awareness is central to knowing how to make both spoken and written language work!

This is one of the reasons why people pay so much attention to NAEP scores when they are released. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as The Nation's Report Card, has been administered since 1969 and "is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what students in public and private schools in the United States know and are able to do in various subjects" ([NAEP Overview](#)). Nationwide assessment of Reading and Math typically occur once every four years. The most recent scores were released in 2022. While a majority of states showed a decline in Reading test scores between 2019 and 2022 in part due to the pandemic, certain states and school districts evidenced a significantly sharper drop than others.

In Tennessee, lawmakers were alarmed by the lack of reading proficiency even before the release of the latest NAEP scores, but those scores heightened their concern. This resulted in the Legislature and Governor instituting measures designed to improve the training of teachers and accountability of Educational Program Providers (EEP's). Tennessee is one of many states instituting what are referred to as "[science of reading](#)" laws,¹ which often single out phonics instruction as a significant part of the solution and focus on students in elementary school.

There is ample evidence of the effectiveness of phonics at the lower levels—for example see [this research](#). One of the most influential researchers in this area is Mark Seidenberg—for a sampling of his work take a look at all [3 blog posts](#) from March 2022. And keep in mind that the question of what to do with students who are not reading at grade level by third grade is [very controversial](#).

Tennessee's largest school district, Memphis-Shelby County Schools, experienced some of the biggest drops in test scores in the country.² Because a majority of the students are Black and from low-income families and only 25% are currently proficient in reading³ this drop is especially troubling. At Oakhaven High School in particular, reading proficiency hovers around 15% and the most recent ACT average score was 14.8. But this school is generating headlines with its new approach to improving reading proficiency. Oakhaven High School has implemented a phonics/phonology across the curriculum approach to improving reading proficiency, a move expected to improve proficiency in all disciplines given that reading is a foundational skill for educational success.

Considering the complexity of this issue, has the principal of Oakhaven High School made the right decision? Is this decision likely to improve reading proficiency, and by extension proficiency in all disciplines, at Oakhaven High School? What should happen if reading proficiency doesn't improve?

Case Report Outline*

Most of the cases you will consider this semester require you to evaluate a complicated situation and/or decision. In this case you may use any of the material included in the case itself as well as foundational material as provided via lecture, and the sources shared by your classmates. Specialized language and concepts specific to this case should be appropriately employed. Case reports that are evaluative in nature typically focus on 5 matters:

1. Your overall evaluation (in other words, a position statement);
2. The evaluative criteria you are applying to this situation and/or decision;
3. The evidence provided to support your evaluation;
4. An explanation of any major contingencies or counterarguments;
5. An action plan.

Overall Evaluation

Your overall evaluation is typically brief (a paragraph or two) and stakes a position. However, because of the complexity of the cases and the messiness of real life, the position statement is seldom absolute but rather one that considers the intricacies at play. Be sure to outline important aspects of the context under study. ***You should write your position statement after completing the rest of your report.***

Evaluative Criteria

The criteria upon which you base your evaluation are the heart of your report. You'll develop the criteria based on the material presented as part of the case, relevant frameworks and concepts included in case material as well as additional instructional material provided (e.g., the introductions to phonology and phonetics in Module 2). Professional experience may be referenced when relevant and concrete—although this should be limited. In brief, you need to articulate to yourself and your readers the criteria that you are using to make your evaluation and why.

Evidence and Analysis

Establishing meaningful and defensible criteria is crucial because it requires your evaluation to be rooted in evidence. Establish your criteria before searching for evidence and then use the criteria to follow the evidence where it leads. Do not try to force the evidence to fit the criteria—it's likely it will be easily refuted.

Proving your overall evaluation is usually the longest part of your report. Use your criteria to organize this section, providing the most important evidence related to each criterion to support your evaluation, while also acknowledging counterarguments.

Counterarguments and Contingencies

In the next to last section, you'll consider credible counterarguments as well as contingencies. Your goal is not to consider all counterarguments, just those that are most credible and likely to have an impact on your overall evaluation. Contingencies are different from counterarguments. When considering contingencies, you are considering changing conditions that you can't accurately predict but that would likely impact your evaluation (e.g., a pandemic or economic recession or new Governor, etc.).

Action Plan

Finally, you'll present an action plan. Your action plan should aim to improve the situation described in the case. You should consider both short and long-term actions (and perhaps medium-term actions). Short term actions should be more urgent and long-term actions ones that are dependent on the short-term actions. You should elaborate not only the action but also who should be responsible for the action, accountable for the action, consulted before taking the action, and informed about the action. Don't forget to consider the resources needed for each action.

*If you'd like to learn more about analyzing, discussing, and writing case studies please look at *The Case Study Handbook* by William Ellet (2018) from which this material was drawn.

Notes

¹Chalkbeat Tennessee. (2021, January 21). Tennessee legislature strengthens third-grade retention requirements. Retrieved from <https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2021/1/21/22243450/tennessee-legislature-strengthens-third-grade-retention-requirements>

²National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) - Reading: Districts - Scores. Retrieved from <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/districts/scores/?grade=8>

³Chalkbeat Tennessee. (2022, October 23). NAEP scores show declines in math and reading for Memphis and Shelby County Schools during the pandemic. Retrieved from <https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2022/10/23/23417260/naep-memphis-shelby-county-schools-covid-pandemic-math-reading-scores-nations-report-card>

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v10i1.183>.

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