

TEACHING NOTES

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IN CASE OF NEED, STRUCTURE IT: A TEACHING METACASE

Caso necessário, estruture: um metacaso de ensino

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Yes, the text of this case has only twelve words. These Teaching Notes, however, use thousands of them to detail the main structural elements and structuring dimensions of a teaching case. While this is an extreme example, teaching cases do not have to be long, extremely detailed and wide in scope. There is a number of purposes, styles and formats one can use to write them, and this will be one of the several topics addressed in these notes

Based on the initial reactions caused in participants by the case's really lean text, and on the identification of relevant gaps and imprecisions that characterize it, we suggest conducting discussions so that participants can learn about how to write a teaching case. What we present is therefore a metacase, i.e., a case about the writing of cases. Or a minimetacase, considering its length.

Objective and application

This work employs precisely a teaching case to foster learning about how to structure a teaching case, in a preliminary stage of its writing. We thus intend to tackle the process of designing teaching cases in business administration.

To that end, we devised a “metacase” to be applied in undergraduate and graduate programs, in disciplines that involve designing teaching cases and notes and/or didactics with cases. We recommend applying it to develop competences in teachers, instructors and other participants interested in designing and using this type of pedagogical instrument.

Given the simplicity and shortness of the case's text, we do not recommend the use of preparation questions or previous reading; instead we suggest for participants to be given the case only upon its application in the classroom. Depending on the teaching strategy the instructor is using, some concepts we present below can be previously discussed with participants.

Alternatively, though a thorough review of the literature on teaching cases was not our goal, this work can be read as an article or a small manual with recommendations on designing and using cases as a didactic instrument. This is why it is published with free access to the teaching notes, an unusual format for GVCasos.

Importantly, while there are various relevant types of cases for teaching business administration, here we focused on the "problem-case" model, commonly denominated the Harvard model.

Applicable concepts

A good teaching case is formed by at least two documents: the *case's text*, which is designed to be given to the participants in the discussion; and the respective *teaching notes*, a document that is reserved for the instructors who will apply the case (Alberton and da Silva, 2018).

There are several styles, models and formats one can use to make teaching cases. Regarding specifically the problem-case model (Roesch, 2007), there are usually three elements that should be observed in the case's text: the case's protagonist(s), the context of analysis and the problem/dilemma experienced by the protagonist. Below we list a few references addressing the structural elements:

- *protagonist(s)*: Alberton and da Silva (2018); Roberts (2001); Roesch (2011); Yemen (2007);
- *context of analysis* Alberton and da Silva (2018); Roberts (2001); Roesch (2007); Roesch (2011);
- *problem or dilemma*: Alberton and da Silva (2018); Araújo and Sousa (2016); Corey (1998); Roberts (2001); Roesch (2007); Roesch (2011); Yemen (2007); Yue (2001).

The constitution of these three *structural elements* of the case's text should be aligned with the main *structuring dimensions* of a teaching case, which can include: purpose (field of knowledge); focus (target audience and analysis perspective); requisites (information and preparation); concepts and theories (teaching goal or conceptual purpose); teaching strategy (application with active learning); and possible others.

Below we list a few reference that explicitly address the structuring dimensions:

- *purpose*: Alberton and da Silva (2018); Araújo and Sousa (2016); Corey (1998); Roesch (2007); Yemen (2007); Yue (2001);
- *focus*: Alberton and da Silva (2018); Araújo and Sousa (2016); Roesch (2011); Yemen (2007); Yue (2001);
- *requisites*: Alberton and da Silva (2018); Roberts (2001); Yemen (2007);
- *concepts and theories*: Alberton and da Silva (2018); Roesch (2007);
- *teaching strategies*: Alberton and da Silva (2018); Corey (1998); Roesch (2007).

Various authors detail and discuss the process of writing cases and their teaching notes, including preparation activities, interview scripts, research methods, the identification of the critical issue, the listing and ordering of sections, the organization of support material, validation stages, etc. As mentioned earlier, there are various styles and formats of teaching cases, and in practice each author prioritizes a personal set of topics and recommendations they consider pertinent. Considering that these recommendations are not conflicting or mutually exclusive, we list a few works by these authors in the bibliographic references of these teaching notes.

Case discussion

The really short narrative we present in the case is obviously inaccurate, and precisely for this reason multiple interpretations are possible. The idea in the initial stage of discussion is to confront the interpretations the participants come up with and to underscore the absence of the three mandatory elements for constituting the text of the teaching case.

From the *protagonist's* perspective:

- Who is Alex? Is Alex a male or a female person?
- What is Alex's role regarding the company: an employee? A partner? A Manager? A visitor? An external auditor?
- Is Alex the protagonist or are the managers (since the text says “what position should the managers take”)?
- Are these “managers” employees at the same company as Alex?

From the *context's* perspective:

- Was Alex fired? Did she/he resign? Or is she/he just going home after a day's work?
- Was Alex visiting the company? Is she/he leaving its building?
- Is she/he leaving a partnership with the company?
- Has Alex already decided to "leave" the company, or is the current context inducing/forcing her/him to do so in the future, in a perhaps reversible process?
- Does "Finally" say something about a long-expected event? Or is it a definite decision?
- Is "leaving the company" something good, bad, undesired or satisfactory?

From the *dilemma's* perspective:

- What is the problem with Alex "leaving" the company?
- Are the managers hierarchically superior to Alex? Or is it the other way around?
- Do the managers work at the company? Or do they see her/him as she/he is leaving the building?
- Is "taking a position" an active decision or a reactive act? Is it a figure of speech (taking a position as in having an opinion) or literal language (a physical position)?

We present below, by way of illustration, half a dozen among countless interpretations for this case:

- *Interpretation A:* Alex is a female employee who suffered harassment at work for some time and has finally decided to take action. It is a serious event, and decision makers need to take a position on it. Why didn't they do so before? From this perspective, this case's focus could be on the fields of Human Resources, Labor Law or even Criminal Law.
- *Interpretation B:* Alex is a client visiting the company, and he ends up staying there longer than would be acceptable for that context. How could that happen? Should managers revise the policy of access to their facilities, or would this be a one-off event?

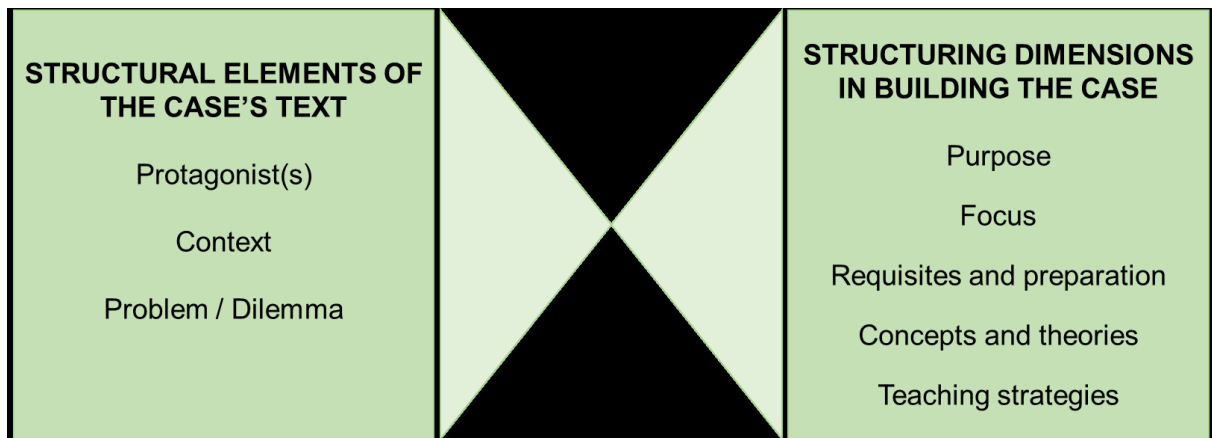
In this context, the discussion could be conducted from the perspective of Work Safety or Client Relationship Management.

- *Interpretation C:* Alex is a partner at the company, but due to disagreements with the other partners, she is not happy about the course the business is taking. If the situation continues, she may decide to leave the company for good, with impacts for everyone, including her subordinate managers. Could something be done, or is it best to wait some time? In this context, discussions about Games Theory and Agency Theory would be suitable.
- *Interpretation D:* Alex is a government tax auditor who spent the last few days analyzing the company's documents in loco. What should managers do after that undesired inspection? The case could be related to Tax Law.
- *Interpretation E:* Alex is a celebrity who is leaving the building of a publishing house in a few minutes, and many fans have been waiting outside the building since early morning. How should facility managers act to ensure everyone's safety? From a quite different perspective, in this context, the approached field of knowledge could be Safety Management.
- *Interpretation F:* Alex is a senior employee who is about to retire, something he has long been looking forward to. His immediate superiors fear losing relevant knowledge about the business, as Alex supervised the implementation and management of the company's main information systems for the last two decades. In this context, concepts of Change Management or IT Governance could be approached.

Initially, some participants are fairly likely to interpret Alex as a female/male employee at the company who is resigning. In this situation, they can be soon confronted with different perspectives. Here, the idea is less to encourage participants' creativity about various interpretations than to show them they exist, and that without further information it would be practically impossible to conclude something about it. In other words, it is necessary for participants to find at least some specific definitions or scenarios to discuss and exercise the three main structural elements: (i) protagonist, (ii) context and (iii) dilemma. This is the first step to designing a good teaching case.

More than that, such structural elements need to be connected and aligned with the case's purpose (including the fields of knowledge); focus (target audience and at least one analysis perspective); requisites (both the information in the case's text and the preparation before the meeting); the concepts and theories underlying the discussions the case enables and, finally, the teaching strategies devised for applying the case (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The structural elements and structuring dimensions of a teaching case.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Class plan

Considering that the textual part of this case is limited and imprecise, which makes a substantial analysis of the structural elements impossible, its application in the classroom is focused on identifying these missing elements and the structuring dimensions that would influence them, and then proceed to a discussion about their possible interrelations. Therefore we suggest below an approach to applying the case, which can naturally be adapted according to the instructor's specific interest and need.

Opening (3 to 5 minutes)

After the instructor has handed out or displayed the case for participants to read, and as soon as possible reactions of discomfort or even mockery arise in view of the text's dimensions and characteristics, we suggest beginning with an equally generic question: "So, what should the managers do?" Participants will inevitably respond with different new questions: "Who is Alex?", "What happened", "Why?", etc. At this point we recommend a push-back to participants: "Who do you think Alex is?", "What do you imagine that could have happened?", etc. In this dialogue, some hypotheses will soon emerge (whether similar to *Interpretations A to F* in the previous section or not), allowing the instructor to suggest a brief competition in the class.

Game (5 a 10 minutes)

The instructor should present the rules of the informal game they plan to use with the class, divided in three or four smaller groups. Each group should present a new hypothetical version of events that is totally different from the ones that were presented before, and they should not let 10 seconds pass from the version immediately prior to theirs. If that happens, the teacher should alternate groups and continue like this for a few more minutes. The “winner” group is the one that presents more versions for the case.

As the versions are presented, the instructor or a designated participant should record on the blackboard the contributions, summarizing them according to the three structural elements of a case (protagonist, context and problem/dilemma), though without explicitly identifying them (see Figure 2). The instructor/designated participant may encourage new and equally generic perspectives, such as “So, in this case, what should be done?”

After five to ten minutes of game, or if participants’ creativity declines before that, the instructor can interrupt the activity.

Figure 2. Blackboard use: initial probing of structural elements.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Discussion about structural elements (10 to 15 minutes)

Still before titling the blocks of contributions recorded on the blackboard during the game, we suggest for the instructor to question participants: “Conceptually speaking, what basic elements do we need to understand this case?” These elements are expected to appear in the answers, even if with different denominations:

- Who are the case’s characters? Who is the protagonist? Or perhaps the protagonists? Would Alex really be the protagonist in the case’s decision? Apparently, Alex is part of the context where “managers” need to take a position, so the protagonists are not defined. Exactly who should make a decision from the perspective presented in the case’s text? How would such person(s) be involved with Alex and with the company? What information would be critical about who the managers are and how they think, so that we can place them in the same position they found themselves in?
- What is the problem’s context? Unlike what may seem at first, Alex denotes to be the context rather than the protagonist, and her/his decision to leave the company triggers a situation where the managers need to take a position or make a decision, so they are in fact the agents in the case. There are many hypotheses about what happened, which shows clearly that more information is required about who Alex is, how she/he is related with the company, what “finally” means (“at long last”, “in a way that cannot be changed”), how to correctly interpret the verb “to leave” in the present continuous form (“is leaving”), etc. Additionally, it is worth stressing that a good context of analysis presents events in a linear, chronological way, thus allowing a longitudinal understanding of the problem.
- What decision needs to be made? When does it need to be made? If the managers are the protagonists who need to make a decision, then what problem do they want to solve? What is the dilemma in the decision? We should stress that not infrequently the case’s problem is not exactly the dilemma of the decision maker(s), but rather a backdrop for the decision. Likewise, the problem may not be explicit in the text, in which case the participants must interpret it so they can understand the dilemma correctly. In the present case, the dilemma is not presented; however, a possible interpretation is that there is a problem related to Alex’s decision/action. In sum, a teaching case must also contain clues about what the problem is and how it is related with the case’s central dilemma/question, as well as indications about possible implications and/or urgency of a decision.

If all these points have not been clearly defined by the participants, then the instructor can ask even more incisive questions, such as “Is Alex the protagonist or context?”, “What is the managers’ relation to Alex?” or, still, “Is it an urgent decision?”.

Once this stage of discussion is done, we suggest for the instructor to title and delimit the elements on the blackboard, as exemplified in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Blackboard use: the three structural elements of a teaching case.

PROTAGONIST	CONTEXT	PROBLEM/DILEMMA ?
Female employee	<u>Alex:</u> Suffered harassment	Invite for a talk
HR auditor	Was not a team player	Get superiors and peers involved
Labour inspector	Got a better job offer	Nothing left to do now
Annoying male employee	Is getting tired...	Assess possible developments and then take a position
Visitor	Will soon get off at ground floor	Involve legal department
Female partner	Disagrees with current practices	Launch escape plan
Managers (at the company?)		

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Discussion about the structuring dimensions (20 to 25 minutes)

To begin this new stage of discussion, the instructor may ask, “What influences the definition of all these elements?”, and write the five dimensions on the blackboard as they are suggested by the participants. If necessary, the instructor can ask inductive questions, such as “Do these elements change according to the case’s target audience?” or “What defines whether this is a HR management case or a case about Legal or Safety issues?”.

With these questions, participants should be able to identify the case’s purpose and focus, or more precisely the fields of knowledge, the target audience and the analysis perspective(s). To stress these dimensions, the instructor may ask, “If the target audience is professors or, alternatively, undergraduate students, would that change anything about how these elements should be presented?”.

These first two structuring dimensions (purpose and focus) are critical for identifying the others. For example, depending on the target audience and the case’s objective, preparation activities may be required, which may be dispensable for other groups of participants. Therefore, we suggest for the instructor to choose a specific purpose and a specific focus and to ask new questions based on those. For example, “If this case is directed to discussing harassment in organizations, with undergraduate business administration students, what information should be provided in the case, and what information could be provided for research or for a preliminary class before discussions?”

It is worth noting that there are countless possibilities for building the context, and we present below, by way of illustration, a few “requisites” of information that could meet that need, based on the examples mentioned earlier:

- What kind of harassment are we talking about? Moral harassment? Sexual harassment?
- Who committed harassment? Is Alex the victim or the perpetrator? Are the managers dealing with the victim or with the person accused of such conduct?
- How did the events or accounts occur? What indications were presented? Is there any controversy?
- What are the implications for those involved: Alex, managers, the company and the other agents? Are these implications known to readers, or do they have to be informed in the text or even before discussions?
- What is the problem underlying the case’s dilemma? In fact, what is the case’s dilemma? Were the possible alternatives identified or can they be inferred by the participants themselves? Is it worth suggesting them explicitly, or is it best to leave them implicit?
- What are the pros and cons of each decision making alternative? Would doing nothing about it be a valid alternative?
- Is there pressure on or an urgency for managers to take a position, i.e., would a delayed decision make the implications worse?

Obviously, not all of these elements need to be made explicit in the case, and sometimes it may be best if participants can identify them from discreet passages. However, these are important textual or preparation requisites that should be connected with the case’s structural elements and structuring dimensions, particularly with the “concepts and theories” that can guide their analysis and discussion.

The case’s conceptual dimension is closely related with its purpose, the case itself being an instrument for the application of concepts and theories. Indeed, teaching cases of business administration are expected to connect substantive purposes (e.g., the discussion about the harassment situation) with conceptual purposes (the learning of theories that help interpret and solve the case). Depending on the substantive-conceptual connection, based on the same example above, the theories can lean towards HR management or interpersonal relationship management; towards the learning of applicable organizational policies, norms and best practices; towards the characterization of crimes and the legal implication for the various stakeholders, etc. In practice, one should not start building the case’s textual part before the substantive and conceptual teaching goals are clearly defined.

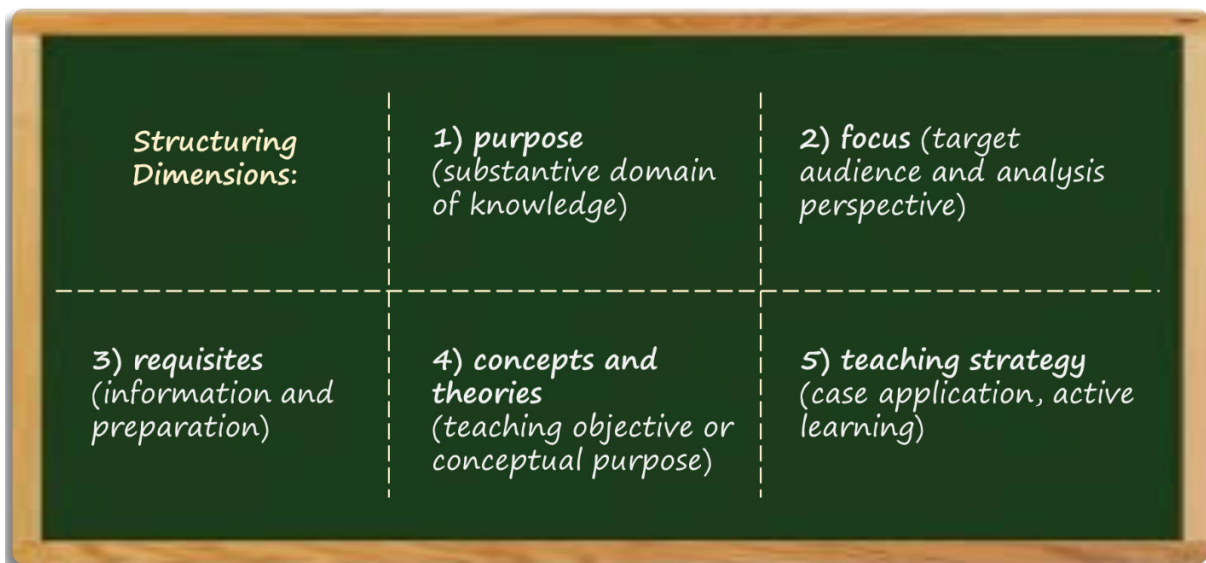
To give participants an illustration of this conceptual perspective, we suggest for the instructor to define again the conceptual and substantive purposes based on which the structural elements can be refined. For example: “Considering the purpose of discussing the company’s HR management from an ESG (environmental, social and corporate governance) perspective, how should you make the structural elements explicit?” We suggest a few possibilities:

- Protagonists: HR manager and the company’s top management, though without neglecting the perspective of the other stakeholders.
- Context: The moral harassment suffered by Alex, a model employee who had her work appropriated by her immediate superior in the company. In this situation, support from her boss is impossible and undesired. Are there reporting and support channels that do not necessarily follow the company’s formal hierarchical structure? In case she is reporting, what are the victim compensation and protection procedures? What could be the balance of consequences for the harasser? How do the companies with the best Corporate Governance and ESG practices deal with such issues. What do experts and management theories recommend?
- Problem/dilemma: If there was moral harassment, then the company has at least one problem, which is precisely the possibility that this situation will happen again, as it has occurred once. Regardless of the efforts, or the lack thereof, on the part of the company to prevent harassment, a serious event has been reported, which puts into question the effectiveness of current management and governance systems. And the occurrence of the harassment situation has implications: the possible loss of talents (after all, model employee and now victim Alex is leaving the company for good); a possible labor lawsuit against the company; or maybe a negative impact on the company’s image in the market, among other consequences. Under the umbrella of the case’s problems is the case’s dilemma: “What position should the managers take” to (i) avoid losing Alex as an employee (theories and practices of talent retention and crisis management); (ii) mitigate a damaging labor lawsuit (support for the victim, reparation and a compensatory settlement); (iii) create a safer environment for employees (revise moral harassment-related norms and procedures); (iv) strengthen institutional communication about the topic for all employees; or even all the alternatives above combined in the establishment of revised policies and their communication to the whole company.
- Another important point related with the dilemma regards the urgency to make a decision. If Alex is leaving the company, would it still be possible to reverse that intention before it is carried out? Is there something to be done immediately to avoid further losses for the organization? Would this be the time to engage the company’s legal support? Opportunely, this could be the springboard for expanding the case’s conceptual purpose.

Still regarding the conceptual perspective, a lot of the information that forms the elements above may be present in the case's text. However, it is acceptable for other information, concepts and theories to be previously approached by the instructor and/or via a preparation task. Likewise, some of the information, practices and concepts may be made explicit only in the final stage of discussions, depending on the instructor's teaching strategy.

Finally, another important structuring dimension of a case is its teaching strategy, which completes the list on the blackboard (see Figure 4). Depending on how the instructor plans to apply and discuss a case, more or less information should be in the case's text, whether implicitly or explicitly. For example: if the strategy involves preparation for discussing the case, with greater emphasis on objective discussions in the classroom, then participants should be allowed access to the relevant information and concepts so they can previously define their position on the dilemma. However, if the strategy involves inducing discussions to build knowledge in the classroom, then less details should be given in advance; they should be provided only when they can actually fit in the discussion. It is the case with this teaching case, in which "Alex is leaving the company..."

Figure 4. Blackboard use: the five structuring dimensions of the teaching case.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Drafting a case (15 to 20 minutes)

Once the structural elements and structuring dimensions have been identified, it is worth applying these concepts in practice soon. In groups, participants are to make a draft of a teaching case about Alex and her/his relationship with the company, connecting elements and dimensions

and explaining the relationship between them. They do not have to write the case, only present what should be in the text and teaching notes. We suggest sequentially completing these stages:

1. Listing the case's structuring dimensions, which will compose its teaching notes.
2. Defining and characterizing who the protagonists are, indicating their relation to the dilemma;
3. Detailing the context and aligning it to the structuring dimensions;
4. Underscoring the real problem approached in the case, even if it will be implicit in the text;
5. Proposing an appealing and feasible question or dilemma for the case's target audience;
6. Depending on the teaching strategy, providing elements or showing decision alternatives, as well as their pros and cons.

One way of organizing this draft would be to create a table to list the main topics to be observed when writing the teaching case (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Preliminary draft with interconnection between structural elements and structuring dimensions

	Protagonist(s)	Context	Problem/Dilemma
Purpose	•	•	•
Focus	•	•	•
Requisites and preparation	•	•	•
Concepts and theories	•	•	•
Teaching strategies	•	•	•

Source: Prepared by the authors.

While writing the case was not prioritized in this class plan, the draft proposed here can help participants do it later as extra-class work, in which case the instructor may suggest for them to read Roesch (2007, 2011) or Roesch and Fernandes (2007), which contain indications on how to narrate a case from the perspective of textual organization, language and narrative structures.

Closure (15 to 20 minutes)

In this final stage the instructor can summarize what was learned, underscoring the structural elements and structuring dimensions, as well as the relationship between them. Depending on the time left, the instructor may have the 3 or 4 groups pitch the drafts they have just created (3 minutes for each group), thus allowing instant evaluation by peers and/or by the instructor regarding how aligned the 3 structural elements and 5 structuring dimensions are.

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