

*Using Case Studies to Develop Policymaking Competencies in Continuing Education:
Integrating Practice and Experience*

June Gwee, Civil Service College, Singapore

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Abstract

This paper presents findings on the use of case studies in practitioner-based, continuing education public policy programmes. Unlike academic programmes that lead to a degree or certificate, continuing education programmes are normally shorter in duration and comprise stackable segments to cater to the needs of working adults. Adult learners of foundation-level public policy programmes want to develop policymaking skills to solve everyday policy problems. Learning with case studies serve a dual function in the development of foundational policymaking skills through two instructional methods: learning through inquiry and learning through practitioner stories. They can develop critical thinking, systems thinking, creative thinking and communications skills. At the same time, they can contain a rich source of policy domain knowledge, tacit knowledge and practitioner-based experience which are integral to policymaking. Case study praxis in adult education is varied and extends beyond the case method.

Keywords: Case Studies, Policy in Practice, Adult Continuing Education

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Introduction

Policymaking can be defined as a purposeful course of action taken to deal with a problem or issue for a specific outcome (Anderson, 1997). It is a complex task that involves policy domain knowledge, sense-making, critical thinking, systems analysis and creative thinking. Often, it is an iterative rather than a linear and sequential event. Some have referred to policy and policymaking as a chaos of purposes and accidents (Sutton, 1999). Neither can any policy be truly novel because every idea, person and event is connected—“In modern days, policymaking never occurs in greenfield sites, as there is always a preexisting policy that must be modified or overturned, leading to friction between existing and proposed policies” (Manazir, 2023, p. 4).¹

Competencies are a set of interrelated knowledge, skills and attitudes that represents a job role and which can be measured against well-established standards, as well as reinforced through training and development (Parry, 1996). The report on Competencies for Policymaking (Schwendinger et al., 2022) identified 36 competencies for innovative policymaking organised into seven clusters: Advise the Political Level, Innovate, Work with Evidence, Be Futures Literate, Engage with Citizens and Stakeholders, Collaborate and Communicate. Many of these skills cannot be taught but learnt. Case studies, as part of the case method for inductive learning, have been effective for acquiring the praxis of policymaking because they provide a real-world context for critical thinking and decision-making.

The case method is among the oldest form of experiential and flipped learning where learners interact with one another to discuss issues and problems set within a story that has several variables interacting with one another. When used as part of the case method, learners analyze data to discover the problem and solve it themselves (Prince & Felder, 2006). In academic programmes, students analyse theory and apply theoretical models to real-world situations (Brooke, 2006). This approach enables students to (a) develop generic skills required for policy practice, (b) gain a deeper understanding of policy theory, acquire knowledge about policy theory and policy practice in the context of practice, and (c) demonstrate an ability to apply theory to analyse policy problems (Walker, 2009). Students are required to demonstrate these abilities either through assessments in the form of graded written examinations or class discussions with marks given for participation.

Beyond the academic setting, especially in non-degree programmes where the goal of learners is to obtain specific real-world skills and knowledge to supplement existing education, the objective of this research is to examine the use of case studies in the development of policymaking competencies in continuing education. This research presents the findings from how case studies were used in two foundation-level policy programmes: the Policy in Practice (PIP) Programme and the Foundation Policy Programme: Thinking and Writing Clearly (FPP) at the Civil Service College Singapore.

The Three-Stage Learning Process

Since policymaking is an interaction with the past and present, while involving multiple players (individuals, agencies, groups) within a given system and domain, the narrative

¹ Manazir, S. H. Reimagining public policy formulation and analysis: a comprehensive theoretical framework for public policy. *Discov glob soc* 1, 16(2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-023-00018-4>

situated in the case study offers a well-conceptualised setting for learners to interpret, analyse and make decisions about issues and problems within a specific context.

The traditional case method strategy is done through a three-stage learning process that requires individual preparation, small group discussion and large group discussion (Wood et al., 2023). This is similar to flipped learning methodology where learners actively read or watch lectures and analyse them before participating in group problem-solving activities (Baig & Yadegaridehkordi, 2023). During individual preparation, learners are given the case study before the start of the programme to be familiar with the contents of the case study. Individual preparation requires discipline and motivation because “there has to be hunger and commitment behind this search for the right analysis, solution and implementation” (Maufette-Leenders et al., 2001, p. 20–21).²

After individual preparation, learners discuss the case study in small groups to “check insights; assumptions and preparation against those of others; clarify understanding; listen attentively and critically to others; and argue for positions based on convictions developed during the individual preparation stage” (Maufette-Leenders et al., 2001, p. 22).³ Both individual preparation and small group discussions take place outside of curriculum time (i.e. class) and are lead-ups to the large group discussion. Large group discussion is the finale where learners gather in a single large group, in class, to engage in deep discussions centred on a case study. The goal of the large group discussion is to push the learning beyond what could be achieved individually and in small groups.

Public Policy Programmes

Learners from the PIP and FPP programmes comprised policy officers with one to two years of policy work experience. They were nominated to attend the programmes to improve their policymaking competencies required in their job roles. A challenge for those relatively new to policymaking is the lack of work experience, policy experience and exposure to the workings within government. To plug this gap, foundational policy programmes were designed for learners to participate in deep learning where they would apply models and complete tasks and while doing so, be sufficiently engaged with the learning content and process of learning to discover insights about policy practice. The main elements of the PIP and FPP programmes are summarised in Table 1.

² Maufette-Leenders, M., Erskine, J. A., Leenders, M. R (2001). *Learning with Cases*. Ontario, Canada: Ivey Publishing, p. 20-21.

³ Maufette-Leenders, M., Erskine, J. A., Leenders, M. R (2001). *Learning with Cases*. Ontario, Canada: Ivey Publishing, p. 20.

Table 1: Overview of Foundation Policy Programmes PIP and FPP

	Policy in Practice Programme (PIP)	Foundation Policy Programme: Thinking and Writing Clearly (FPP)
Learning outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe the policy development and evaluation cycle 2. Analyse the common challenges faced at each stage of the cycle 3. Propose factors that help you make effective public policies 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Define policy problems 2. Analyse common challenges in the policymaking process 3. Write and convey policies concisely and clearly
Target learners	Policy officers involved in policy operations	Policy officers involved in policy design and review
Duration of programme	2 days	2 days
Topics covered	Structure of Government, Policy Development and Implementation Cycle, Principles of Governance, Public Service Values	Structure of Government, Problem Definition, Policy Development and Evaluation Cycle, Principles of Governance, Policy Writing, Structuring Arguments
Number of case study discussions	2	1
Duration of case study session	90 mins	60 mins
Format of Programme	Synchronous Virtual	Synchronous Face-to-Face
Average number of learners per session	50	30 (based on 8 sessions)
Assessment Requirement	Nil (Formative Assessment)	Nil (Formative Assessment)
Course Completion Requirement	85% of Attendance	85% of Attendance
Total number of Programmes from Jan 2023 to Oct 2024	11	8

Methodology

Research was conducted by triangulating data from three sources: programme evaluation questionnaires of learners who attended the programmes, in-depth interviews with instructors who used case studies for discussions in the PIP and FPP programmes, and in-class observation of the case study discussions. This methodology enabled data to be collected

from three independent yet related sources which helped reduce potential biases and improve data reliability and validity.

From January 2023 to June 2024, there were a total of 19 PIP and FPP programmes with 774 learners from more than 60 public agencies across the Singapore Public Service. These programmes were conducted by four instructors who could choose two out of a selection of five case studies for their programmes. The case studies used in the programmes typically comprised 10-page structured cases that described policy issues and challenges. With a small sample size of instructors and case studies, this research aimed to minimise distraction from other variables such as trainer dispositions, facilitation styles, case study topics, and narrative styles of case studies which could affect the engagement of learners. The consistent use of only five case study topics and a common terminology by instructors helped to define for learners what is a case study and what learning with case studies entail. The programme evaluation questionnaire of all participants in the 19 runs of the programmes formed the full sample for the quantitative survey of this research.

A factor that might affect research reliability is the different platform in which case study discussions took place: virtually in PIP and face-to-face in FPP. Learner engagements could vary when case study discussions took place in different learning spaces. Bearing in mind that the data collected under different conditions could affect data reliability, this variable was accounted for during data analysis.

Programme Evaluation Questionnaire

The programme evaluation questionnaire (Table 2) comprised multiple choice (questions 1 to 11) and open-ended questions (questions 12 to 13). This was a standard questionnaire that was applied across both PIP and FPP programmes, as well as other programmes within the College. Overall, the effectiveness of the programme was based on scores received in the areas of learner engagement, acquisition of knowledge/skills/insights, and application of learning. Questions that targeted the effectiveness of learning through case studies are found in close-ended questions 5, 6, 7 and 8. Open-ended questions 12 and 13 allowed learners to provide additional feedback in verbatim. The response rate from the questionnaire survey was 87%.

Table 2: Programme Evaluation Questionnaire

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1. I believe that the intended outcome(s) of this learning experience has been met.
 2. I was engaged during the learning experience.
 3. I acquired useful knowledge/skills/insights that will support me in my work.
 4. I am able to apply what I have learnt.
 5. My learning has been enhanced by the use of this case study.
 6. I am satisfied that the content for the case study was presented in a concise and coherent manner.
 7. I am willing to recommend this case study to others who are interested in this topic.
 8. My learning has been enhanced by the use of this case study.
 9. I felt that the instructor was effective in helping me learn.
 10. I am satisfied with the administrative and logistical support.
 11. On the whole, I am satisfied with the learning experience.
 12. What were the best features of the learning experience?
 13. How could the learning experience be improved?
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In-Depth Interviews

The interview questions for instructors were designed around three areas: the background & experience of the instructors which gave context to their approach in using case studies for learning, their instructional design process in preparing and conducting case study discussions to achieve the desired outcomes, and their views on the effectiveness of case studies to achieve policymaking competencies.

The qualitative interviews were semi-structured to allow follow-up questions, clarifying questions or the fine-tuning of questions during the interview process. A first interview was conducted with an instructor with similar sample profile to test the interview questions for phrasing, sequencing and probes, as well as conduct a trial run of the data collection procedure and interview process. From the feedback received, the interview questions were simplified and shortened. Some questions were modified to distinguish responses between knowledge development versus skill development. The final interview guide is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: In-Depth Interview Guide

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1. How did you prepare and conduct these case study discussions?
 2. On average, what proportion of learners had read the case study before class?
 3. To what extent were learners able to identify the problems/issues presented in the case study?
 4. How did learners apply policy concepts, frameworks and tools to the problem/issues outlined in the case study?
 5. How did learners understand the complexities of policy practice?
 6. How effective were learners in identifying and explaining the operating contexts and policy principles presented through the case study?
 7. To what extent do learners bring their experience into the discussions?
 8. What worked or didn't work in allowing learners to demonstrate policymaking competencies when analysing the policy issues?
 9. How effective was the case study in enabling you to facilitate a good learning experience? What worked or didn't work?
 10. In your view, how can we improve the effectiveness of case studies for learning?
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Direct Observation

Direct observation of the case study discussion enabled the author to observe and assess how learners demonstrate policymaking competencies in the areas of critical thinking, systems thinking, decision-making, communication skills and creative thinking. These competencies were identified when mapping FPP and PIP learning outcomes to case instructors' instructional design strategies, while referencing the report on competencies for policymaking by Schwendinger and colleagues (2022). Bloom's Taxonomy framework was used to gauge the level of complexity demonstrated by learners when trying to achieve the learning objectives (Bloom et al., 1956). During direct observation of the case study discussions in the programmes, a checklist was used to assess the extent (Always, Sometimes, Limited) in which each item was demonstrated in the checklist (Table 4). The checklist was mapped to the questions in the in-depth interviews and programme evaluation questionnaire. Observer bias was reduced by focusing on long-term observable behaviours rather than short term impressions.

Table 4: Checklist for Observation of Case Discussion

Item	Mapping to:		Degree of Evidence (Always, Sometimes, Limited)
	In-depth Interview Questions	Programme Evaluation Questionnaire	
Lesson Design			
1. Learners read and prepared the case study before class	Q2	Q12, Q13	
2. Instructor set context and provided a clear introduction to the case study and learning objectives	Q1	Q6, Q9	
3. Learners were actively engaged and participated freely in the discussion	Q1	Q2, Q9, Q12, Q13	
4. Instructor summarised the key points and takeaways from the discussion	Q1	Q1, Q9	
5. The learning objectives for the session were met	Q1	Q1, Q3, Q12, Q13	
Critical Thinking Skills			
6. Learners examined the situation from multiple and different viewpoints	Q3, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9	Q3, Q4	
7. Learners evaluated ideas, arguments, or methods with sound reasoning	Q4, Q5, Q7, Q8	-	
8. Learners identified the problem and its root cause	Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q8	-	
Systems Thinking Skills			
9. Learners were able to understand and describe key aspects of the system as part of the operating environment	Q3, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8	-	
10. Learners evaluated impacts within the sector/industry and explained the significance of various cause and effects	Q3, Q5, Q7, Q8	Q11, Q12, Q13	
11. Learners explained the behaviour of the system within the operating environment	Q3, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8	Q3, Q4	
Communication Skills			
12. Learners composed arguments and present logical reasoning based on evidence from the case study to support their arguments	Q5, Q7, Q8	Q3, Q4	
13. Learners applied and referenced relevant frameworks and concepts in explaining their arguments	Q4, Q6	Q3, Q4	
Creative Thinking Skills			
14. Learners suggested new ideas that were not previously used in the domain	Q7, Q9	-	

Findings

The qualitative data from interview transcripts and open-ended questionnaire feedback were scrutinised through ground-up coding by labelling and clustering data. The labels were then analysed systematically and used to identify themes and sub-themes. These were later cross-referenced and compared against quantitative data of learners' ratings of the programmes.

Using content and thematic analysis, three themes emerged: “Syndicate-based Learning”, “Contextualised Policymaking” and “Practitioner Insights and Tacit Knowledge”.

Syndicate-Based Learning

Syndicate-based learning was more suitable for adult learners of the programmes. Syndicate learning can be described as cooperative peer learning involving small groups of 5 and 10 learners working to find answers for a common task within a fixed timeframe (McKerlie, 2018). There were two main differences between Wood’s three-step learning approach and the syndicate approach. First, individual preparation and small group discussion in the syndicate approach were conducted in class rather than before class. Second, large group discussion in a single conversation was replaced by groups presentations on their assigned questions.

Although learners were given the case studies for pre-reading at least two weeks before the start of the programme, most did not spend much time on the materials. Being in the initial years of their career, many were deeply entrenched in their day-to-day work and could not devote time to read the pre-programme materials. With busy work schedules, it was challenging for adult learners to read the case studies before class, much less form small groups to discuss them before class. Beyond work, they would rather devote time to family commitments and other personal activities.

“Many of us have our Business-As-Usual work to do and would only glance through the pre-course materials.”(Respondent)

“This is where I think adult learning is very different. Most of the learners would say ‘No time, because I’ve got so much work to do.’ They are busy. There is no protected time for them to read. They were taking work time to carry out learning activities required by the programme. Then there were other reasons— ‘I also have family things to do.’ Most feel that ‘I have work pressure, I have family pressure. So, I skim through the case study. I don’t really have a good sense of the case study, or I haven’t read it.” (Instructor A)

As adult learners were often less prepared when entering a case study discussion, instructors unanimously used syndicate learning approach because it helped to level up learners who might not have read or analysed the case study to do so at the small group discussions. Furthermore, completion of the programmes was based on 85% of attendance and no grades were awarded for formative assessment. Hence, instructors also found the syndicate approach best suited for adult learners, compared to the three-stage learning approach (Table 5).

Table 5: A Comparison of Three-Stage Learning Process and Syndicate Learning Approach

	Three-Stage Learning Process by Wood et. al	Syndicate Learning Approach
Individual Learning	Learners read case studies <u>prior</u> to class	Learners read case studies <u>in</u> class
Small Group learning	Small groups discuss and analyse case studies <u>prior</u> to class	Small groups are formed <u>in</u> class and given a specific question to discuss and answer
Large Group Discussion	Instructor facilitates large group discussion in a single conversation	Groups take turn to present their answers to the assigned question

For both programmes, ratings specific to case study discussions were consistent at a mean of 4.3 out of 5, regardless of class size (30 learners versus 50 learners) and mode of delivery (face-to-face versus virtual programmes). However, overall scores for all other categories, including engagement during the learning experience, effectiveness of instructor, and programme learning outcomes were all higher for FPP which was conducted face-to-face and had an average class size of 30 learners. Qualitative feedback from PIP learners highlighted that the Zoom platform was less conducive for case study discussions of complex issues, and it was difficult to sustain attention.

Contextualised Policymaking

Through questioning techniques that centred on ‘how’, ‘what’ and ‘why’ that corresponded with levels 2 to 5 of the Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956), instructors probed learners to analyse the information provided in the case study to identify policy issues, apply policy frameworks, present their policy ideas and solve policy problems, i.e. the performance goals of competencies required of policymakers. Observations of large group discussions and in-class presentations revealed that adult learners in these programmes were highly articulate and could present their ideas clearly and convincingly to a high extent. However, they were only able to sense-make issues based on the information provided in the case study, demonstrate critical thinking, systems thinking and creative thinking to a moderate extent when making policy decisions (Table 6).

Table 6: Demonstration of Policymaking Competencies

Competencies	Description of Competencies
<i>To a high extent</i>	
Communications	Ability to explain with evidence and empathy
<i>To a moderate extent</i>	
Critical Thinking	Ability to sense-make, analyse complex problems, evaluate options and make decisions based on logic and evidence
Systems Thinking	Ability to connect issues with the larger system and its interdependencies
Creative Thinking	Ability to suggest different and new ideas previously not used in the policy domain
Domain Knowledge	Understanding of policy context, operating context, policy domain

Learners’ analyses were limited by their own policy and work experience because they were at the early stages of their career. While effective in analysing policy issues and presenting well thought-through issues based on the information provided in the case study, they had limited knowledge of their own policy domains, other policy domains and the inter-dependencies within the larger system.

Learners could only apply critical thinking based on what could be gleaned from the case study but could not deepen discussions. Some had provided feedback that they would prefer case studies situated in their own policy domains so that they could better analyse policy problems within the context of their work.

“It is hard to formulate policy analysis for content areas we are not familiar with, and within such a short period of time.” (Respondent)

“The quality of discussion depended a lot on group members’ contribution.”
(Respondent)

“For this group of younger policymakers, we need to have a case study that is situated in their domain because ultimately, they are making policies within their domains. This is very different from if you are using a case study in say, a leadership programme where you can use a case study from any domain to learn leadership lessons. In a policy programme, it is about the practice of policymaking within a very specific domain. I need to keep coming back to ask them how is this relevant to them in their current job role, in their current context.” (Instructor B)

Still, adult learners were hungry for knowledge about how to navigate the operating environment within their policy domains (e.g., social, economics, health and education).

Practitioner Insights & Tacit Knowledge

Learners were keen to discover authentic, behind-the-scenes, domain-specific policy insights and tacit knowledge from past and current policymakers, which make these stories quite unlike case studies used for inquiry-based learning where certain facts may be hidden or contained in the teaching note. They wanted to know how experienced and veteran policymakers identified root causes of policy issues, made decisions about trade-offs and dealt with dilemmas faced during policymaking. These case studies also contained policy fundamentals, policy principles, policy vision, and operating context which were needed for young policymakers to develop sensibilities, ethos and evaluative judgement in policymaking.

“In terms of storytelling, it is really powerful. It’s not just about skills. It is powerful at imparting knowledge. ‘Oh, is this what happened?’ ‘Is this how government works together?’ ‘I didn’t know this back-story?’ Learners find this interesting but it may not directly lead to them acquiring policymaking skills. It is beyond inductive learning. It inspires ethos, a sense of belonging, which is very powerful.” (Instructor B)

“The case studies were really interesting and enlightening, so more sample case studies (as optional reading, maybe).” (Respondent)

A consistent idea that emerged was the use of shorter structured stories in learning. Conciseness and format were as important as the substance of the content itself. Learners were also drawn to shorter and more concise case studies with some degree of interaction.

“Length has become something of a concern. Patience for case studies is very thin. The length is something that people don’t have patience for anymore. They are not doing a degree programme and they don’t have patience for a long case study. Case studies have evolved. They don’t have to be written down. They can be videos, podcasts, etc.” (Instructor B)

The three themes are linked by two instructional strategies—learning through Inquiry and learning through practitioner stories. The former enables policymakers to develop critical thinking skills while the latter develops policy domain knowledge and policy sensibilities.

Both are essential competencies for policymakers to integrate policy theories with practitioner experience (Figure 1).

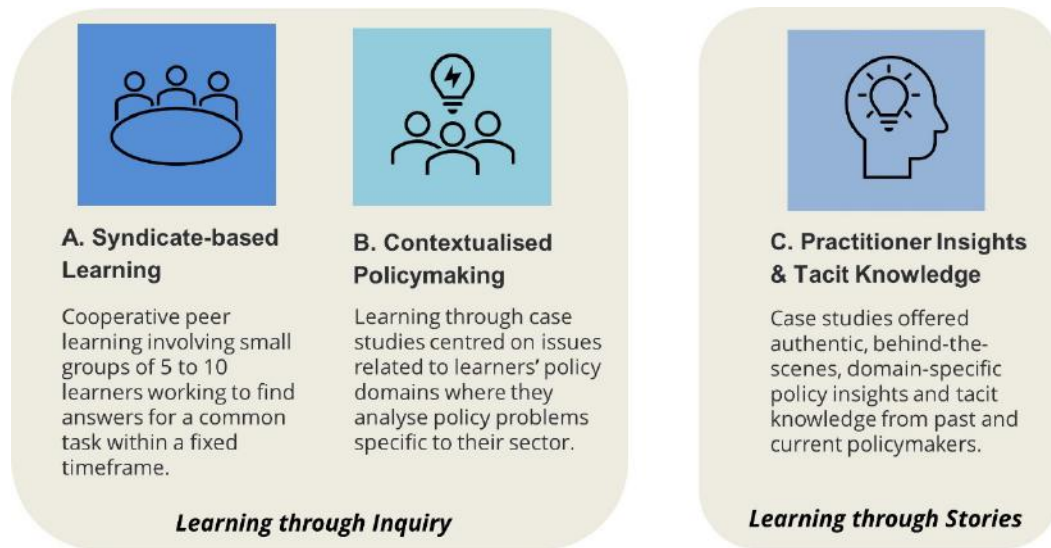


Figure 1: Overview of Research Findings

Conclusion

From this research, it can be concluded that learning with case studies is useful and relevant to the development of policymaking competencies, but they serve different functions in continuing education of policymakers. First, policy domain knowledge is integral to policymaking, alongside other policy skills such as critical thinking, sense-making, communication, etc. At the core of understanding the praxis of policymaking lies the tacit and practical knowledge of policy veterans. All of which are essential to the development of policy-related competencies. Second, case studies serve a dual function in the development of foundational policymaking competencies. They are used for inquiry-based learning and story-based learning. Both types of learning are needed for competency development of policymakers (Figure 2).

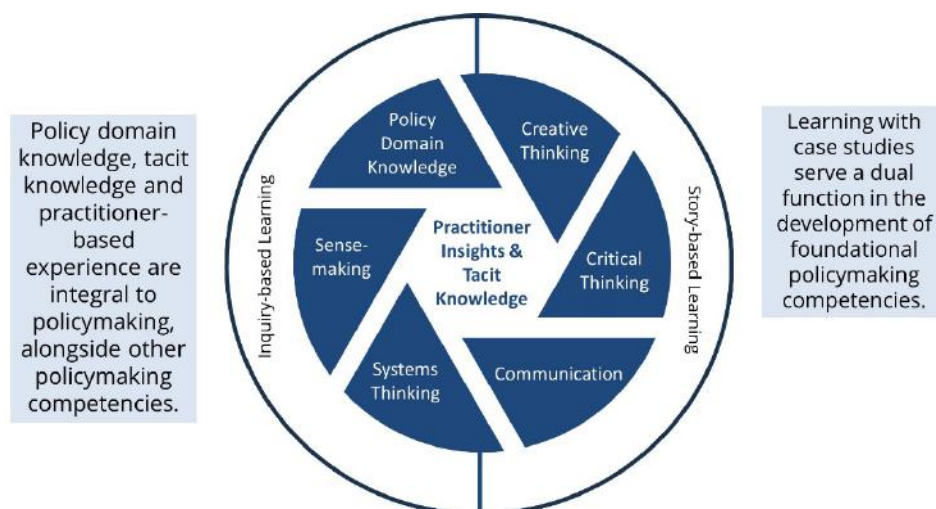


Figure 2: Overview of Research Findings

The composition, design and usage of case studies in both forms are dependent on the learning goals, learner motivations and learning preferences. For adult learners in continuing

education programmes, learning with case studies for policymaking is more effective if case studies are situated in the learners' policy domains. Simply because policy is not developed in a vacuum and is situated within specific operating contexts with social, political and economic stimuli, the context in which policy is made and the understanding of the policy domain and the context in which policy is made is part of policymaking and a much-needed competency. This echoes the research by Collins, Green and Hunter (Collins et al., 1999) which emphasised the importance of linking policy context with policy process to strengthen policy analysis. Clearly, there are benefits of using domain-specific case studies in foundational policy programmes. However, it may be challenging to implement. Policy classes would have to be customised to specific groups of learners which may be resource-intensive and difficult to scale.

In foundational policy programmes where learners could benefit from deeper learning from the knowledge and experience of veteran policymakers, a variety of case studies in different modalities could be designed and curated to meet different learning needs, as well as offer a wider array of learning experiences. Programme design could vary to include a combination of teaching cases for facilitated, inquiry-based learning and story-based cases for self-directed learning.

Whether for inquiry-based or self-directed story-based learning, case studies are effective in the development of policymaking competencies because they provide “a focal point around which analysis, experiences, expertise, and observations can be exchanged” (Harling and Akridge, 1998, p. 3).⁴ According to Barnes, “a good case is not just a history; it relates an event—or sequence of events—that contains enough perplexities to inspire a rich educational discussion. The goal of a good case is to present rich data coherently” (Barnes et al., 1994, p. 71–72).⁵

There are differences in writing and designing a case study for facilitated learning in a classroom setting or for self-directed, self-paced learning by adult learners. Learning with cases is effective only if there are purposefully designed, well-crafted narratives and engaged learners. The way the case study narrative is structured, sequenced, presented and distributed could be vastly different depending on how it is used. There is scope for further research on how to design a good case study to achieve different learning goals that are useful to adult learners in developing policymaking competencies.

⁴ Harling, K. F., & Akridge, J. (1998). Using the case method of teaching. *Agribusiness*, 14(1), 1-14.

⁵ Barnes, L.B., Christensen, C. R. & Hansen, A. J. (1994). Teaching and the case method. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.

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