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Developing Undergraduate Law Students' Legal Reasoning through Authentic Case-Based Instruction

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Abstract: Case-based legal education often treats cases as illustrations of settled doctrine, giving students little opportunity to determine facts, identify disputes, or justify competing interpretations. This article examines how authentic cases can be used to develop legal reasoning among undergraduate law students. It organizes training around four linked tasks: reconstructing legally relevant facts, defining disputed issues, interpreting and applying legal rules, and defending conclusions in oral and written form. Staged release of case materials, adversarial questioning, and legal writing exercises support these tasks. Effective implementation requires careful case selection, anonymization of case information, and assessment focused on students' reasoning processes.

Keywords: Authentic cases; Undergraduate law students; Legal reasoning competence; Case-file-based instruction; Experiential legal education

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1. Introduction

Undergraduate legal education must not only enable students to master legal concepts, institutions, and rules, but also prepare them to reach legal judgments in concrete cases on the basis of facts and reasons grounded in law. The Ministry of Education and the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the CPC Central Committee have identified legal interpretation, legal reasoning, legal argumentation, and the ascertainment of legal facts as essential competencies in the education of outstanding legal professionals [1]. In this article, an authentic case context refers to a classroom setting constructed from lawfully obtained case-file materials that have been de-identified and adapted for instruction, or from publicly available litigation documents and judicial decisions. Its defining feature is not merely that the facts are labeled as real. Rather, it preserves, to an appropriate degree, factual uncertainty, adversarial positions, and room for reasoned disagreement over the application of law. Legal reasoning competence is understood here as the integrated ability to

establish legally relevant facts from evidence, interpret and apply legal norms to issues in dispute, and reach legal conclusions supported by reasons that can be scrutinized. The discussion focuses principally on undergraduate law students who have acquired foundational knowledge of substantive and procedural law. Existing scholarship has explored the use of authentic materials to redesign criminal practice courses through case-file-based instruction [2]. Further specification is nevertheless needed as to how authentic case materials can be transformed into a continuous sequence of training in fact identification, issue formulation, legal interpretation, and reasoned expression. Reform in this area should ensure that the organization of materials, the design of learning tasks, and the assessment system all contribute to the development of legal reasoning competence.

2. The role of authentic case contexts in teaching legal reasoning

2.1. Case-file materials provide a complex factual context

Case files commonly contain party statements, witness testimony, contracts, transaction records, expert opinions, and electronic data. Produced by different actors and at different stages of litigation, these materials may corroborate one another but may also contain omissions, ambiguities, and contradictions. Unlike textbook cases compressed around a particular doctrinal point, lawfully obtained, de-identified, and appropriately edited case-file materials can preserve the complexity through which the facts of a case are established. Their first pedagogical contribution is that the factual premises of legal reasoning are no longer supplied directly by the instructor; students must examine and reconstruct them under evidentiary constraints. Case-file materials thus place students in a setting where the facts have yet to be settled and demonstrate that legally relevant facts are not mere restatements of events in ordinary life. A case's legally relevant facts emerge only after the available evidence has been examined and weighed [3]. On that basis, students can identify the issues in dispute and determine which legal norms govern the case.

2.2. Adversarial submissions reveal divergent legal arguments

The parties often give different accounts of the same case. Each party selects the facts that support its position. Each party may also offer a different reading of the law. In a civil case, the claimant may rely on certain facts to establish liability. The defendant may question whether those facts are true, relevant, or legally important. In a criminal case, the prosecution and the defense may disagree about what the evidence proves. They may also disagree about the meaning of the law. Students can read both sides to find the exact point of disagreement. They can then see that a legal rule does not decide a case by itself. A sound conclusion needs evidence, a clear explanation of the law, and a response to the other side's objections. Students can trace how each party moves from facts and legal rules to a conclusion. They can also decide whether each step of the argument is convincing.

3. Principal stages of legal reasoning training in authentic case contexts

3.1. Identifying and organizing legally relevant facts

Case files do not give students a single and complete account of what happened. Pleadings, evidence, and hearing records each contain only part of the story. Some information is missing. Other statements conflict with one another. Students must first place the events in order and identify the people involved. They must

then find the evidence that supports each factual claim. This work helps students separate facts supported by evidence from facts that remain disputed or uncertain. Students also need to identify the legal relationship and consider the rules that may apply. These initial judgments help students decide which details matter to the legal question. Students can then arrange the selected facts according to who acted, what happened, when it happened, what followed, and how the events were connected. Students can use this factual account to frame the disputed issues and identify the law that governs the case.

3.2. Accurately formulating the issues in dispute

Once the relevant facts have been sorted, the next task is to decide which disagreements call for a legal answer. The conflict may concern the parties' accounts of events, the admissibility or weight of evidence, the meaning of a rule, or the legal effect of proven conduct. Reading the relief sought alongside the response shows how each side uses facts and law to support its position. Each material disagreement can then be stated as a question whose answer could change the outcome. Some questions must be settled before the main issue can be reached; others matter only if an earlier answer makes them relevant. A clear order keeps further fact-checking, legal research, and argument tied to what the court must decide.

3.3. Interpreting and applying legal norms

Once the disputed issues have been framed, students need to determine which legal norms govern them. The inquiry begins with the nature of the legal relationship, but it also requires attention to the date of the relevant events and the version of the law then in force. The source and rank of each provision, its scope, and its relationship with other rules also need examination. Difficulties arise when statutory language is open-ended, a legal concept admits more than one reading, or several norms appear applicable. The preferred interpretation should be supported by the statutory text, the provision's place within the legal system, its regulatory purpose, and relevant judicial practice. Students must then test the facts against the elements of the chosen norm and explain whether each requirement has been met. A sound conclusion should make every step, from identifying the governing rule to applying it to the proven facts, open to scrutiny.

4. Instructional pathways for developing legal reasoning through authentic cases

4.1. Constructing legally relevant facts from case materials

Training in fact construction should begin with case materials, while the judicial decision should ordinarily be withheld until a later stage. Instructors may de-identify copies of case files that have been lawfully obtained and authorized for teaching and release them in stages corresponding to the course of the proceedings. When public court materials are used, the instructional text should be prepared from the original documents and clearly identified as an adaptation; pleadings, testimony, or evidentiary details must not be invented. In the first task, students prepare a chronology, a diagram of the parties and other actors, and an evidence-to-fact matrix that separately identifies undisputed facts, disputed facts, and matters still requiring proof. After students submit an initial factual report, the instructor releases testimony, documents, or procedural materials inconsistent with the initial account and requires students to re-evaluate it. During feedback, the instructor should ask students to identify the source of each proposition, explain the relationship among items of evidence, and address contrary material. This process corrects such recurring errors as reproducing a party's allegation as fact, confusing evidence with the fact to be proved, and omitting information adverse to

a preliminary conclusion.

Guiding Case No. 93, the Yu Huan Intentional Injury Case, is suitable for this exercise. An instructor may organize the materials around such events as the police officers' arrival at the reception room, the attempt by Yu Huan and his mother to leave, the debt collectors' obstruction, Yu Huan's warning with a knife, and the stabbing of four persons. Students must distinguish background circumstances, including the high-interest debt and earlier humiliation, from the restraint of movement, manner of encirclement, intensity of the ongoing infringement, and injuries at the time of the incident. They then list separately the facts supporting the defensive character of the conduct and those bearing on the permissible limits of defense. The appellate court held that Yu Huan had acted defensively but that, by causing one death, two serious injuries, and one minor injury, his conduct had clearly exceeded the limits of necessity and constituted excessive defense. It accordingly resentenced him to five years' imprisonment [4]. Comparing students' factual reports with the findings in the final and effective judgment reveals omissions and errors in legal characterization and reinforces the principle that legally relevant facts must be established from evidence.

4.2. Formulating issues from the parties' competing positions

Issue-formulation exercises can draw directly on the claims, defenses, and evidentiary disputes contained in an authentic case. In Guiding Case No. 1, Shanghai Zhongyuan Property Consultancy Co., Ltd. v. Tao Dehua (Dispute over an Intermediation Contract), Zhongyuan alleged that Tao had used housing information supplied by the company to complete the transaction without its involvement and sought payment of liquidated damages. Tao responded that the owner had listed the property with several intermediaries, that he and his family had learned of it through another intermediary before the viewing arranged by Zhongyuan, and that he chose another intermediary because it offered a more favorable price and service terms. Using the published text of the Guiding Case, the instructor may prepare materials covering the relevant provisions of the Real Estate Purchase Confirmation, the dates of the viewings, the prices quoted by different intermediaries, the transaction ultimately completed, and the parties' submissions, without altering the facts or evidentiary relationships. The court's statement of the issue and its disposition should initially be withheld. Students representing the two sides then prepare a claim-and-defense matrix identifying the factual basis, legal ground, and foreseeable rebuttal for each position. Through classroom questioning, the broad question of whether Tao circumvented the intermediary can be narrowed to whether he used the housing information and transactional opportunity provided by Zhongyuan. Students can then examine the validity of the anti-circumvention clause, the source from which the property information was obtained, and the independent contribution of the intermediary that completed the transaction. Position statements, reciprocal questioning, and revision of the issue teach students to derive questions for decision from competing submissions rather than simply treating a litigant's position as the issue itself.

4.3. Interpreting and applying legal norms to the issues

Locating a legal norm is only the beginning of the exercise; instruction should focus on explaining its meaning and relating it to the facts. For each issue, the instructor may provide a norm-analysis worksheet requiring students to identify the source of the norm, its status as law in force, its conditions of application, the legal concepts requiring interpretation, plausible interpretations, and the case facts supporting each possible conclusion. After students submit their analyses, classroom discussion should compare the interpretive alternatives. The student advancing a conclusion must explain how the provision applies to the case, while

classmates challenge the argument by reference to the hierarchy of norms, the grounds for interpretation, and the fit between facts and legal elements. An analysis that moves directly from a statutory provision to a result, or substitutes a value judgment for legal reasoning, should be returned to the issue and case materials for further support.

The Yu Huan case can be organized as three progressive tasks under Article 20 of the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China. Students first determine whether the unlawful restriction of personal liberty, accompanied by humiliation and minor assault, constituted an ongoing unlawful infringement. They then assess whether the conduct amounted to a violent crime that seriously endangered personal safety and, finally, whether stabbing four persons clearly exceeded the limits of necessity. The number and conduct of the aggressors, the fact that the police remained in the compound and that the lights of the police vehicle were visible, the persons and parts of the body stabbed by Yu Huan, and the resulting injuries should be related respectively to the initiating conditions, timing, objects, and limits of justifiable defense [5]. The Zhongyuan v. Tao case permits a comparison between former and current law. Students should first reconstruct the case under Article 424 of the Contract Law then in force, which defined an intermediation contract, and determine in light of Article 2.4 of the Real Estate Purchase Confirmation whether Tao was in breach. As an extension exercise, they may compare Article 965 of the current Civil Code and analyze the condition that a client 'uses the trading opportunity or intermediary services provided by the intermediary' [6]. The public availability of the housing information, the earlier viewings, the prices quoted by different intermediaries, and the process by which the transaction was completed all bear on the meaning of 'uses.' The two cases thus support distinct forms of norm application: the interpretation of an open-textured criminal-law standard and the interpretation of a civil-law concept.

5. Institutional safeguards for authentic case-based legal reasoning instruction

5.1. A selection protocol for authentic case materials

Authentic case materials should be reviewed before being introduced into teaching. Responsibility for this review is shared among the instructor, the course team, and the law school's academic administration, with each addressing a different part of the decision. The instructor's proposal should identify the source of the materials, the case's current procedural status, the course in which they will be used, the intended learning objectives, and the permitted scope of use. The course team then considers whether the materials are genuine and sufficiently complete, whether the case is representative of the legal problem being taught, and whether its complexity is appropriate for the students concerned. A selected case should contain reasonably clear factual disputes and room for reasoned disagreement over the applicable norms, and its file should be sufficient to support fact-finding, issue formulation, and legal argument. Selecting a case solely because it attracted public attention or involved unusual events may diminish its pedagogical value. Approved materials should be placed in a course case repository that records their source, authorized uses, relevant course, student level, and date of revision. If the governing law changes, the original decision is lawfully reversed or modified, or the permitted scope of disclosure and use changes, the materials should promptly be revised or withdrawn to preserve both accuracy and lawful use.

5.2. A de-identification review protocol for case information

De-identification review should operate as a separate condition for admitting authentic case materials

into the classroom, distinct from their pedagogical selection. A law school may adopt a case-information checklist under which the person preparing the materials completes the initial de-identification and the course team or a designated reviewer conducts a second review. Direct identifiers, including the parties' names, identification numbers, contact details, home addresses, and bank account information, should be removed or replaced. Information revealing a minor's identity, a victim's private life, health information, family relationships, trade secrets, and case-handling information that may not lawfully be disclosed should be removed, replaced, or summarized in accordance with applicable rules. Even when case information may lawfully be used and contributes to the lesson, teaching materials should contain only what students need to complete the assigned reasoning task [7]. Any labels substituted for persons or items of evidence must be used consistently throughout the file, since inconsistent replacement may obscure the relationships among the facts. Source files should be reviewed before they are placed on a teaching platform. Access should be limited according to course enrollment and user role. Written rules should specify whether materials may be downloaded or copied, how they may be shared, and when retained copies must be deleted after the course. Keeping a record of review, release, access, and removal makes responsibility traceable throughout the use of the materials.

5.3. An assessment framework for students' legal reasoning competence

A sound assessment looks beyond the final answer and considers how a student reached it. At the start of the course, the course team should issue a marking guide for four areas: relevant facts, disputed issues, legal rules, and the reasoned conclusion. The guide should state the weight of each area and describe the expected level of performance. Teachers can assess factual work by checking each important statement against the case file. An issue list should isolate questions that may affect the result and place them in a sensible order. Legal analysis can be judged by the authority used, the explanation of the chosen reading, and the link between the rule's elements and the proven facts. The final argument should show how the reasons support the conclusion. Fact summaries, issue lists, legal analyses, and revised drafts can be collected to show progress over time. For major assignments, a second marker or a sample check may be used when staff time allows. The team should also compare marked work with agreed examples from time to time. A student who questions a mark should be able to request a review and receive a clear explanation. These measures keep scoring consistent, make decisions open to review, and show students where their reasoning needs further work.

6. Conclusion

The pedagogical value of an authentic case context does not lie in replacing textbook examples with real facts as such. It lies in requiring students to confront conflicts in evidence, opposing positions, and the interpretive openness of legal norms. Case-file materials, party submissions, and judicial decisions can support evidence-based, norm-grounded, and reasoned legal judgments only when they are converted into connected learning tasks. Implementation must also remain within the boundaries set by lawful acquisition of materials, appropriate protection of personal information, and stable assessment standards. Future teaching practice should adjust the volume of materials to the field of law, students' stage of study, and the complexity of the case. Changes between successive factual reports, norm-based analyses, and legal documents should be used to evaluate learning outcomes and to guide the continuing revision of the instructional design.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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