

## *Original Paper*

# Designing Interactive Case-Based Discussions for Administrative Law in a Blended Learning Environment

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### **Abstract**

*Although blended learning offers temporal and spatial flexibility for case-based discussions in administrative law, such discussions often suffer from the mechanical accumulation of online materials and the dominance of a small number of students in offline classrooms. The underlying problem lies in the failure of instructional design to make students' reasoning processes in the legal review of administrative actions visible and discussable. To address this issue, this paper focuses on the design of interactive case-based discussions. It defines deep interaction as the externalization of reasoning processes, dialogue among multiple participants, and the restructuring of cognitive frameworks, drawing on constructivist learning theory, problem-based learning theory, and generative teaching theory. Based on this theoretical foundation, the paper constructs a three-stage progressive model consisting of asynchronous pre-class preparation, synchronous in-class debate, and post-class reflection and consolidation. Before class, students complete individual cognitive warm-up through progressive question chains and written case analyses. During class, structured idea exchange is promoted through comparative discussion, role-playing, and adversarial debate, while the teacher serves as a facilitator of legal reasoning by questioning, guiding, and summarizing students' arguments. After class, structured reflection reports are used to support the internalization and reconstruction of students' legal cognition. In this process, teachers are expected to shift from knowledge transmitters to facilitators of reasoning and managers of the learning process. Process control is implemented through task segmentation, clarified participation rules, and staged formative feedback. The evaluation system emphasizes process-oriented assessment by examining the quality of argumentation and the development of reasoning from three dimensions: pre-class preparation, in-class participation, and post-class reflection. In doing so, the teaching focus is redirected toward the cultivation of legal reasoning. With the legality review framework as its organizing thread, this design reconstructs blended case teaching as a process in which students actively construct administrative law reasoning, thereby*

*providing a structured path for improving blended case-based teaching and promoting students' ability to think like lawyers.*

**Keywords**

*Blended teaching, Administrative law, Deep interaction, Instructional design*

**1. Introduction**

In recent years, blended teaching methods have become increasingly popular in the field of legal education. In the “Opinions on Strengthening Legal Education and Legal Theory Research in the New Era” issued by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council in 2023, it is explicitly proposed to “adapt to the new form and new requirements of ‘Internet + education’ and innovate teaching methods and means”, and law-related majors in various institutions of higher learning are also actively exploring teaching models that combine online and offline in teaching practice. Case studies are a key part of administrative law teaching, and they play an important role in training students’ legal thinking and cultivating their ability to practice the rule of law. When administrative law courses adopt blended teaching for case studies, two headache-inducing situations often arise: the online session is prone to sliding into material stacking, students merely mechanically read and organize viewpoints, and substantial thinking processing is obviously insufficient. Once there are a lack of active thinking and the inability to connect the case with the real situation, the original intention of case teaching to cultivate practical ability is difficult to achieve. The offline session often turns into a situation where a few students take the lead in speaking while the majority passively listen in, and the classroom interaction that was supposed to encourage extensive participation is actually empty. The problem is not that the technical means are insufficient, but that the interaction design itself fails to hit the core of the subject. The core of administrative law case studies is to guide students to review the legality of administrative acts based on the facts of the cases. If the teaching design does not break down this review process into specific, actionable interactive steps, it will be difficult for students to build structured legal argumentation skills.

While existing research has recognized the importance of interaction in blended teaching, there is still a lack of effective solutions on how to precisely design deep interaction. Some scholars have pointed out that the goal of deep interaction is to prompt students to reconstruct their cognitive structure rather than just remain at the superficial level of information exchange. In the case study of administrative law, this change in cognitive structure is manifested in whether students can consciously start from the framework of legality review and use normative analysis methods to make logically coherent and well-grounded judgments about administrative acts. This paper attempts to start from the specific disciplinary thinking of administrative law of administrative law and explore how to conduct in-depth interactive design for case studies under the blended teaching model.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations of Deep Interaction

### 2.1 Conceptual Definition of Deep Interaction

The more common form of shallow interaction is that when students answer the teacher's questions, they only make factual statements, such as merely recounting the course of the case or directly citing legal provisions, without their own thinking and analysis involved; The communication among students is limited to simple affirmations or negations without corresponding arguments; the discussion is teacher-led throughout, and students respond passively...

In contrast, deep interaction should at least have the following characteristics: First, the externalization of the thought process. Students should not only be able to state the conclusion, but also demonstrate the reasoning process through which the conclusion is formed. In the case study of administrative law, this means that students should not merely state "the penalty decision is illegal", but should explain in sequence: what type of administrative act the accused act belongs to, what review standards should be applied, on which element the administrative agency has flaws, and why. The unfolding of the thinking process itself is the substantive content of the interaction. Second, dialogue among multiple subjects. Deep interaction is not the question and answer between the teacher and individual students, but the collision and confrontation of ideas among students. For example, when one student claims that a certain behavior constitutes an overstepping of authority, another student who holds a different view can refute it, and both sides can debate this at the level of normative interpretation. This dialogic nature forces participants to constantly examine the weak points of their arguments and deepen understanding through rebuttal and response. Third, the reconfigurability of cognitive structure. The ultimate goal of deep interaction is not to reach a standard answer, but to develop students' legal thinking. By repeatedly going through the thinking process of "identifying the type of administrative act - determining the review criteria - reviewing each element - reaching a conclusion", students can gradually internalize this external knowledge as a framework for analyzing administrative law issues and form a structured understanding of the administrative law knowledge system.

### 2.2 Theoretical Foundations of Deep Interaction

Deep interactive instructional design can be supported by the following theories.

Constructivist learning theory holds that knowledge is not passively received but is the product of active construction by learners based on existing cognitive structures. In the case study of administrative law, before students enter the classroom, their minds are already filled with plain and straightforward judgments about how administrative power operates and how citizens' rights should be protected. The role of deep interaction is to put these existing understandings together with the normative requirements of legal dogmatics, create cognitive conflicts, and force students to adjust and correct their original understanding. Take a common phenomenon as an example: Most people, out of everyday habit, tend to judge whether an administrative act is right or wrong based on the quality of the substantive result, but the legality review framework requires students to set aside the result first and start with procedural and authority issues. This misalignment in thinking is precisely where the

interaction needs to make an effort to bridge.

There is a fundamental view in problem-based learning theory that real, or simulated problem situations are effective tools for driving learning. Administrative law cases are inherently problem-oriented. They often present tensions between administrative power and civil rights in a specific situation, requiring students to constantly shuttle between norms and facts to find a way out for the case. The design of deep interaction requires teachers to control themselves first and not to pass conclusions to students too early, but to design a chain of interlocking questions to guide students to complete the learning step by step in the repetitive process of “identifying problems - analyzing problems - solving problems”.

The generative teaching theory points out that teaching objectives are not to simply transfer pre-prepared items to students as they are, but are dynamically generated during the interactive process. To put it more straightforwardly, teachers have to leave enough open space for classroom interaction to allow students to come up with fresh ideas that deviate from the pre-set track and to adjust flexibly according to the actual direction of the discussion. In case studies of administrative law, students are likely to suddenly ask questions from an unexpected angle, such as questioning the legitimacy of a specific detail in an administrative procedure. This is not digression at all; rather, it is a great opportunity to move towards a deeper understanding. It would be a pity if the teacher were in a rush to make progress and let it slip away.

### **3. A Three-Stage Progressive Design for Interactive Case-Based Discussions**

Blended teaching offers a unique temporal and spatial advantage for deep interaction: online sessions can be used for individualized thinking preparation and knowledge build-up, while offline sessions focus on high-density thinking collisions and viewpoints. Based on this feature, the in-depth interaction of administrative law case studies can be designed in a progressive manner in three stages: “asynchronous preparation before class - synchronous debate during class - reflection and consolidation after class.”

#### *3.1 Asynchronous Pre-Class Preparation*

The goal of the pre-class stage is not to get students to master all the knowledge in advance, but to complete the “mental warm-up” so that they enter the classroom with a preliminary problem awareness and analytical framework. The teacher’s task at this stage is to provide the necessary knowledge build-up and clear-thinking guidance.

The first step in conducting case studies is to pick out cases that are truly valuable for teaching. Two points should be considered when selecting cases: first, typicality, which should cover the key points of administrative law; second is disputability, meaning that the case should not have only one analytical path, but several possible directions should be left for substantive discussion. For instance, a case that revolves around the reasonableness of administrative discretion is more likely to lead the interaction deeper than a case that is purely entangled in fact-finding.

Once the case is selected, the teacher needs to adhere to the “legality review” thinking framework, set up a set of progressive pre-questions, and lead the students to complete the preliminary analysis before class. The question should not start with such broad questions as “Is this administrative act legal or not?” It is better to break it down layer by layer: First ask students to identify which type of administrative act the alleged act belongs to, then ask what review criteria should be applied to such acts, then look at which part of the various elements of the act is most likely to cause controversy, and finally ask them to give a preliminary judgment and go back to the legal norms to find the basis. The purpose of designing this series of questions is to force students to complete the entire thought process, rather than to bypass reasoning and directly reach that conclusion.

The final step of the pre-class preparation is to ask students to write down the analysis results and submit them to the teaching platform. This requirement is placed here, of course, to encourage students not to enter the classroom empty-handed, but more importantly, it is to lay out the thinking for examination. As soon as the writing starts, the originally vague intuition has to be transformed into a well-organized argument, and in this process, the misunderstandings and blind spots in the students’ own thinking are also easily exposed, providing a precise entry point for the interaction in class. By looking through these written analyses before class, the teacher can identify common problems and then pick out the points of disagreement and concentration of controversy, and thereby determine the topics to be discussed in class.

### *3.2 Synchronous In-Class Debate*

This is the real stage of deep interaction in the classroom. The core of the design here is not to have a few active students take on all the speaking, but to set up a back-and-forth dialogue mechanism where each student can present their arguments and be ready to be questioned and challenged at any time.

When the teacher enters the classroom, there is already a student’s pre-class written analysis in hand, so there is no need to repeat the knowledge point from the beginning. An effective way to start is to pick out two or three typical assignments with different positions and reasons and put them directly in front of the whole class for comparison: “Where did these analyses reach consensus? Where did the differences come from? Are these differences due to a different determination of the facts of the case or a discrepancy in the interpretation of the legal norms?” This “compare-locate-deepen” approach throws students into the field of argumentative contrast right from the start, rather than waiting for the teacher to present a standard answer.

In the main part of the discussion, role-playing often takes the interaction to a deeper level. Administrative law cases themselves are packed with different roles - administrative agencies, administrative counterparts, interested parties, reconsideration authorities, courts, each with their own reasons and based on different norms. Let the students take on these roles in groups, each standing their own position, presenting their claims, and explaining the reasons. Take an administrative penalty case for example. The task of the “administrative agency group” is to justify the penalty decision, the “counterparty group” has to find faults in substance or procedure, and the “court group” does not stand

on either side. After listening to the reasons of both sides, it gives a judgment and writes down the key points of the judgment. As a result, students are forced to invoke legal norms in specific contexts rather than talk about the meaning of the provisions in the air, and several rounds of “assert - refute - assert again” naturally arise.

To keep this adversarial debate from getting into chaos, rules must be set in the details. Teachers should make it clear that no matter which side you hold, when you put forward your claim, you must follow the normative basis and not just bring up value judgments or common sense of life. And when refuting the other party, precisely point out exactly which link in the other party’s argument chain has gone wrong - whether the legal provision is quoted wrongly, whether the understanding of the norm is biased, or whether the process of fitting facts into the norm has skipped a step. Throughout the process, the teacher steps back and mainly does three things: “host - question - summarize” : allocate the pace and opportunities of the speech, and not let a few people fill up the conversation; Push the discussion deeper with questions at key points; At the end of each round, sort out the point of contention in time to help students stay focused on the main thread in a tangled argument.

At the end of the in-class period, the teacher should summarize and enhance. Unlike the traditional “teacher summarizes the correct answer”, the key point of inductive enhancement is to sort out the different analytical paths presented in the discussion and their respective normative bases, and point out the fundamental value conflicts of administrative law reflected by different paths, such as the tension between efficiency and procedural justice, the boundary between administrative discretion and judicial review, etc. This approach can continue to guide students to think openly after the classroom discussion and also provide direction for post-class reflection.

### *3.3 Post-Class Reflection and Consolidation*

After-class sessions are often overlooked, but they are an indispensable part of the deep learning loop. After intense debates in class, students need a relatively quiet period of reflection to integrate and digest the diverse viewpoints that emerge from the discussions, and to incorporate the new insights generated by classroom interactions into their own knowledge structure.

Specifically, teachers should require students to submit a structured reflection report. The report should not be a mere running account of the class, but should revolve around a specific issue. You can design a reflection framework like this: After the class discussion, did your judgment on this case change? If so, what factors prompted you to re-examine your original judgment? What is the most compelling argument that the opposing camp has put forward, and what legal norms or principles does that argument rely on? In this case study, what was the biggest difficulty you encountered in your argument? What new insights have you gained about analytical methods in administrative law through this study? This framework leads students to reflect not on “where the correct answer lies,” but on “how my thought process has evolved,” thereby promoting the development of cognitive abilities.

Meanwhile, teachers should conduct targeted teaching reflections based on students’ performances in both the pre-class and in-class stages and provide individualized feedback. When reviewing students’

reflection reports, teachers should not focus on whether the students' conclusions are right or wrong, but rather on the thinking traits reflected in their reasoning process: can they distinguish between factual issues and legal issues? Did they strictly follow the train of thought of legality review? Can reasonable elements be extracted from opposing views? The teacher's comment itself constitutes a deep interaction: it allows the dialogue of thoughts between the teacher and the student to continue even after the teaching activity is over.

#### **4. Teacher Competencies and Process Control for Deep Interaction**

##### *4.1 Teacher Role Positioning and Competency Requirements*

Deep interaction in blended case studies poses competency requirements for teachers that are different from traditional lecture-based teaching. In the traditional classroom, the teacher's core role is that of a knowledge transmitter; in the deep interaction mode, this core role shifts to "mind coach" and "process manager".

When it comes to the role of mind coach, teachers have to take on a few concrete tasks. The first thing is to break down the very abstract administrative law thinking model, such as the legality review framework, into a series of visible and tangible operational steps, and then accompany the students along this track. The second thing is to have sharp ears that can spot a thinking breakpoint in a student's response at once, and then use questioning to turn that breakpoint into a springboard. For instance, one student said, "The administrative agency made a decision without listening to the party's statement and defense. This procedure is definitely illegal." At this point, the teacher can follow up with a question: "Does not listening to statements and defenses necessarily lead to procedural violations in all circumstances? Are there any exceptions? Does the way of hearing vary depending on the nature and urgency of the case?" This way, students won't jump straight from a broad principle to a conclusion, but will be led to think about how the norms are actually used. The third task is to be able to handle the "surprises" that pop up in the classroom at any time. During the discussion, the student is likely to come up with an analytical approach that the teacher never thought of when preparing the lesson. At this point, you can't avoid it. You have to quickly consider whether this perspective has a normative basis and is worth delving into. If you think it through, either turn it into a good material to advance the discussion or point out the deviation in direction on the spot.

As process managers, teachers need to design and dynamically adjust the interactive structure. This includes: arranging the time allocation of different teaching segments reasonably to prevent pre-class preparations from going through the motions or in-class discussions from ending up hastily; Be observant of students' participation, provide timely supportive guidance to silent students, and moderately balance out students who are overly dominant in the discussion rhythm; When a dispute is at an impasse, it should neither end the discussion prematurely with a conclusion nor allow it to spread aimlessly. Instead, new impetus should be injected into the discussion by summarizing the points of contention, suggesting analytical angles, etc.

#### *4.2 Specific Strategies for Process Management*

Effective process control is not about limiting what students say in advance, but about ensuring the smooth progress of teaching activities at all stages by setting clear task nodes and participation rules, thereby achieving the expected interactive goals.

In order for deep interaction to truly work, a few pillars need to be set up in teaching management. The first one is to break tasks into small pieces. Before class, during class, and after class, just three large blocks are not enough. Under each block, there should be several sub-tasks, each with a clear time point and something to be handed in. For example, before class, you can break it down into these steps: Read the case and basic materials, fill in the legality review framework item by item, organize your initial views and mark the corresponding normative basis, and then go through the written analysis submitted by other students. If these steps only stop at the soft reminder of “suggested completion”, in the end, there is a high probability that only a small number of self-motivated students will be doing it, so each step should have a passable bottom line of completion.

Second, make the rules of participation clear. For the discussion to go deeper in class, teachers cannot expect students to get into the swing of things on their own. They need to lay out a few basic rules in the first class so that the whole class has a clear idea of how to organize the discussion. For example: Each person should speak at least once in each round of discussion; It's not enough to just come up with a conclusion; you need to follow up with reasons. When refuting someone, first point out which part of their argument you are targeting, the matter, not the person; The argument should be based on legal norms from beginning to end. These rules and regulations seem to put a lot of constraints on the discussion, but it is precisely these shackles that keep the small talk out and make room for deep interaction.

Third, feedback follows the stages step by step. Teachers should give feedback on students' pre-class written analysis, in-class speech, and post-class reflection reports, but clearly score how and to what extent at different stages. In the pre-class stage, the feedback should be brief, just touching upon the key issues worth noting in the analysis lightly. There is no need to write lengthy comments and leave the effort of deep collision in the classroom. During the class, feedback is supported by immediate verbal questioning and comments. Its task is to lead the train of thought at the moment, not to rush to determine who is right and who is wrong. Once the class is over, teachers can take the time to carefully review the reflection reports and provide each student with a comprehensive written response. This approach of “increasing feedback with each stage” ensures that no part is too cumbersome to operate, and that deep interaction continues from the beginning of the course all the way to the end.

### **5. Design of the Evaluation System**

The evaluation system is very important in instructional design - to put it bluntly, how a course is graded and what is valued will determine which direction students will go. If it's the final exam that decides the outcome, students will have little motivation to keep going through the rounds of deep

interactions on a regular basis; Conversely, if the evaluation criteria are given too vaguely, students will look at the phrase “active participation” and have no idea how far it counts or where to go. Therefore, the evaluation design of the blended administrative law case study should combine the process evaluation and the terminal evaluation, focus on the routine, and make the process truly weigh more than the final exam.

### *5.1 Dimensions and Indicators of Process-Oriented Evaluation*

Process evaluation should cover all learning activities in the pre-class, in-class, and after-class stages, with a focus on the quality of thinking and engagement demonstrated by students in various tasks. It can be carried out in the following dimensions.

In the pre-class preparation dimension, the evaluation indicators mainly include: the completeness and standardization of written analysis, the accuracy and comprehensiveness of legal norms retrieval, and the extent to which the “legality review” thinking framework is applied. It is not required that students’ analytical conclusions be “correct”, but that their analytical process be “well-grounded”, that is to say, each step of judgment should be supported by the corresponding norms, reflecting the analytical logic of legal doctrine.

In the dimension of classroom participation, evaluation indicators can be designed from both the “quantity” and “quality” aspects. On the quantitative level, it mainly examines whether students follow the speaking rules and ensure a basic frequency of participation. The quality aspect is more crucial, focusing on the following: whether the speech presents substantive arguments on the legal issues involved in the case, rather than simply echoing or expressing emotionally; when refuting others’ viewpoints, do you accurately understand the other party’s argument and make a targeted response; Whether one can delve deeper into the argument in multiple rounds of discussion, rather than just repeating at the level of the first statement. The teacher’s classroom observation record is an important basis for evaluation in this section.

In the post-class reflection dimension, the evaluation criteria are closely centered around the students’ reflection reports: whether they can truthfully present the changes in their viewpoints before and after the discussion and the reasons for them; whether they can identify the reasonable elements contained in the other party’s argument; whether they can accurately diagnose one’s own weaknesses in the argument process; and whether they can gain a deeper understanding of the fundamental issues of administrative law involved in this case?

### *5.2 Functional Positioning of Summative Evaluation*

In the deep interactive teaching model, summative assessment no longer regards differentiation and ranking as the primary function, but is positioned as a natural extension and comprehensive test of process learning. Summative assessment can still take the form of a case analysis test, but it must be in line with the teaching objectives: using new cases as materials, setting several progressive questions, focusing on examining students’ thinking process of independently conducting analysis using the “legality review” framework, rather than mechanical memorization of scattered knowledge points.

Even if the final assessment still requires a score or grade, students' perception of it should be "This is a test of my thinking ability" rather than "this is a spot-check on whether I have memorized accurately".

### *5.3 Diversifying Evaluation Participants*

To further enhance the depth of interaction, a student self-evaluation and peer evaluation mechanism can be appropriately introduced. Student self-assessment requires students to reflect on their level of engagement and quality of participation at each stage by referring to the indicators of process assessment. This self-assessment itself is part of reflective learning. Peer assessment, which requires students to make brief evaluations of each other's performance in the classroom discussion, not only provides teachers with more diverse perspectives of observation, but also helps to develop students' critical assessment ability, enabling them to make accurate judgments about the quality of others' arguments, which is itself a high-level legal thinking ability. Of course, when introducing peer review, teachers need to set clear evaluation criteria and provide necessary calibration guidance after the review to avoid it being formalistic or disturbed by non-academic factors.

## **6. Conclusion**

Blended teaching brings an opportunity for innovation in the organization of time and space for administrative law case studies, but the improvement of technical conditions does not automatically lead to an improvement in teaching effectiveness. The core of the deep interactive design discussed here is not about which online platform or technical tool is used, but about returning to the thinking essence of the administrative law discipline, that is, the structured analytical framework for the legality review of administrative acts, and using this framework as the main thread to reconstruct the teaching process as a process in which students actively construct legal thinking. In this design, the asynchronous preparation before class completes the initial unfolding of individual thinking, the synchronous debate during class enables the structured collision of multiple viewpoints, and the reflection and consolidation after class promote the deep internalization of the thinking model; the teacher transforms from a knowledge transmitter to a guide and manager of the thinking process; the focus of evaluation has shifted from the correctness of the conclusion to the process of argumentation. Of course, when the design is implemented, there are still some questions that need further study: How to ensure effective coverage of interaction in classes of different sizes? How to help students with weak foundations cross the participation threshold? How to balance depth and breadth within the limited class hours? The solutions to these problems, on the one hand, depend on the continuous exploration and adaptation by instructional designers in practice, and on the other hand, require more substantial empirical evidence from legal education researchers. The continuous improvement of administrative law case study teaching ultimately points to the practical cultivation of the ability to "think like lawyers". It is clearly impossible to fully achieve this goal through one or two classroom reforms, but every structured improvement in instructional design is a real step in that direction.

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