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Overview

Using Cases in Higher Education

The case study method is one of a number of pedagogical tools and approaches that faculty members in higher education administration courses and discussion leaders in leadership or management development programs have at their disposal. As with any pedagogical approach, case-based teaching and learning is characterized by particular purposes and principles. According to Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen (1994), case method teaching is grounded in five fundamental principles:

- The primacy of situational analysis
- The imperative of relating analysis and action
- The necessity of student involvement
- A nontraditional instructor role
- A balance of substantive and process teaching (pp. 47–49)

Argyris (1980) also offers five essential features of case method instruction:

- The use of actual problems

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- Maximum participant involvement
- Minimal reliance on the instructor
- An absence of objective ("right" or "wrong") answers
- Instructor- and case-created drama into which participants are drawn (p. 291)

Both Barnes et al. and Argyris agree: analysis, action, a unique rapport between student and instructor, and active student involvement form the backbone of case method teaching and learning.

When used effectively, discussions of case studies enable instructors to energize the classroom environment and to engage participants with one another and with the theoretical and practice-oriented aspects of the case material. Through this medium, participants can systematically analyze and reflect on realistic, fact-based leadership and administrative dilemmas in a safe atmosphere while discussing, debating, and defending various points of view. As Hammond (1980) notes:

Cases help managers sharpen their analytic skills, since they must produce quantitative and qualitative evidence to support recommendations and decisions. In case discussions, participants are challenged by their instructors and fellow participants to defend their arguments and analyses; the effect on the participant is a sharpening of problem-solving and a heightened ability to think and reason rigorously [p. 1].

Hammond adds: "The case method of learning does not provide the *answer*. Rather, several viable 'answers' will be developed and supported by various participants within the total group" (p. 3). McDade (1988) echoes this general view, noting that "a 'right' answer or 'correct solution' is rarely apparent" (p. 1) in a case dis-

cussion. Instructors should remind participants that the purpose of a case discussion is not to crack the case but rather to explore the multiple perspectives and interpretations of those administrative and leadership dilemmas that higher education administrators face in their day-to-day work.

Applegate (1988) underscores the point that cases are a means to a more fundamental instructional end: “It is only with experience that we learn that the case serves as a backdrop for enabling students to discover the specific concepts and skills the course is designed to teach” (p. 1).

Using a case study approach to the teaching of higher education administration can benefit both beginning graduate students and experienced administrators alike. This pedagogical approach enables instructors to expose graduate students in higher education degree programs to a wide range of administrative situations and dilemmas in their full complexity and within actual institution-based settings. Cases also provide students with an opportunity to explore “real-life” examples of how particular theories and analytical frameworks and research findings apply (or do not apply) to actual administrative practice. More experienced administrators of colleges and universities also have much to gain by participating in case-based courses, seminars, and professional development institutes. With their knowledge of and experience in handling multifaceted and often contentious campus-based predicaments, seasoned administrators can benefit from case discussions by gaining new perspectives and insights from their colleagues about how best to confront and tackle the many complex issues they regularly face in their work as academic leaders.

In many instances, participants in case discussions can learn as much from one another as they do from the instructor teaching the case study. As a result, it is important for the instructor to make every effort to tap into the experience and wisdom of case discussion participants to the greatest extent possible. Particular strategies for doing this are discussed later in this guide and in the teaching notes accompanying each case.

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The use of case study pedagogy can also yield benefits for instructors themselves. Richard Elmore, a faculty member at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and veteran case teacher, offers a personal reason for his belief in the value of case teaching: “I use cases because they teach me about student learning; cases open a window into the minds of students. Cases have taught me how to observe and understand minds at work” (in Merseth, 1998, p. xii).

In addition to providing instructors with powerful insights into “minds at work,” case teaching also challenges faculty members to maximize the potential learning that goes along with having students so actively engaged in the instructional process. At the conclusion of a typical case study session, many instructors report feeling a combination of “exhausted” and “exhilarated.” The sense of exhaustion comes from the sharp focus and intense listening that is required of a case instructor. The exhilaration results from having played a role in a highly interactive and stimulating learning opportunity.

Students, too, find learning with cases fresh and engaging. Typical student comments on the use of case studies in graduate courses in higher education administration include:

“Through the micro lens of a particular case, we learn about more general trends and challenges.”

“Cases help stimulate thinking.”

“Cases were helpful in illuminating topics and solidifying my understanding of concepts.”

“Cases enabled me to apply theoretical frameworks and concepts to more concrete examples.”

“Cases are an excellent tool for understanding major concepts in a practical way.”

Reactions such as these provide a sense of the potential impact that high quality case teaching and learning experiences can have on students.

A student in a master's degree program in higher education administration, Maria was taking four classes and an independent study during her first semester of graduate school. Her reading load was intense, and she simply had to decide before each class what she would have time to read and what would fall by the wayside. Current Issues in Higher Education was a case-based course, and she enjoyed grappling with the dilemmas presented in each case. Last week, she read a case about participatory planning processes at a liberal arts college. Though neither well-versed nor particularly interested in planning issues, she read the case carefully, knowing a lively discussion awaited her in class. That week, she and her classmates analyzed the case study, took on the roles of faculty member, dean, and vice president for academic affairs, and hashed out the players' effective and ineffective strategies. Maria now understands the importance of planning processes and is sensitive to the politics that may play out should she ever find herself part of one. She may not have read the unit on planning had it appeared in a textbook or article, but she read the case study in anticipation of the discussion she knew would await her in class.

For students and instructors alike, the ability of case studies to bring the world of practice into the classroom proves mutually beneficial.

Case Method Instruction Versus Lecture-Based Instruction

Faculty and discussion leaders who incorporate the case study method into their teaching offer various reasons for their enthusiasm for this type of pedagogy over more traditional, such as lecture-based, instructional methods and routes to learning. At their best, case studies can serve as the basis and focal point for productive, learning-oriented conversations of the many sometimes difficult and

contentious administrative and managerial problems and issues confronting higher education leaders.

Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen (1994) observe that case teaching “puts the students in an active learning mode, challenges them to accept substantial responsibility for their own education, and gives them first-hand appreciation of, and experience with, the application of knowledge to practice” (pp. 3–4). Case-based teaching and learning also allows participants to consider multiple assessments of a single administrative problem or dilemma, builds students’ confidence in the diagnosis of complex administrative problems, promotes a tolerance for ambiguity and complexity, forces students to generate nonobvious, alternative responses to difficult administrative problems, and challenges students to adopt an “action perspective” (Boehrer, undated). As noted previously, cases also enable instructors to bring to bear, and benefit from, other professionals’ expertise, experience, and observations during the course of a case discussion. Finally, in contrast to lecture-based teaching and learning where students tend to examine a text, students working with cases can actually “engage in the text,” making their learning experience more interactive (Boehrer and Linsky, 1990) and imagining themselves taking part in a real-life scenario. The reader is no longer a passive observer but is transformed into an active participant. As a student in a case-based graduate school class in higher education administration observed, “Case studies really bring the readings to life and help us to synthesize concepts by placing them in a real world context.”

Wassermann (1994) notes that the route to learning represents another essential contrast between traditional learning and the learning inspired by the case method. She observes that traditional, lecture-based teaching and learning follow “a linear progression, with a beginning, middle, and end [and] the purpose of the journey along the linear pathway seems concerned with the destination—that is, students’ acquisition of specific knowledge” (p. 84). By contrast, the case learning pathway, according to Wassermann:

is far from linear. It folds over upon itself, backs up, returns to retrace steps, in a series of many investigatory stops along the pathway. . . . Along this more zig-zag learning pathway are a series of interrelated experiences that allow for the reframing of personal meanings, so that students are continually challenged to add each new life experience to their developing cognitive frameworks and deepening understandings [p. 84].

Because students are such active participants in a case study discussion, it is essential that they be well prepared for their multiple roles as listeners, advocates, skeptics, and naysayers. This preparation takes many forms and can be, to say the least, time consuming. Instructors and discussion leaders using case studies should highlight this issue for all participants—the “you get out of it what you put into it” adage certainly holds true. In fact, an instructor would be well advised to give participants a brief overview at the outset of the course or institute and to inform them up front of what will be expected of them in terms of preparation time and the extent to which case studies play a role in the course.

In the syllabus to *Organizational Change in Higher Education*, Professor Richard Chait of the Harvard Graduate School of Education informs his students about the role of case studies in his course. “Relying largely on case studies, the course applies different frameworks and theories to examine the change process, to analyze organizational problems, and to develop constructive strategies for change. The course rests on the assumption that effective administrators must be able to analyze complex problems, constructively change organizations, communicate effectively, work collaboratively, and make sense of ambiguity and uncertainty through an understanding of organizational theory.” Later in the syllabus, Chait notes: “Classroom discussions will center on nonfictional case studies and

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supplemental readings.” He also underscores that the course relies “heavily on classroom participation and collaboration” and that “contributions in class should reveal a substantial familiarity with assigned readings, a capacity to analyze the issues and problems under discussion, and an ability to listen to, incorporate, synthesize, and constructively criticize the comments and work of classmates.”

At a minimum, students or participants should be asked to read the case study at least once (preferably more than once) before the discussion. Typically, an instructor will also assign supplementary readings to accompany the case study. Such readings might highlight research findings or theoretical frameworks pertinent to the topic or dilemma upon which the case study focuses. Needless to say, a participant who has not done any advance preparation for a case study discussion is unlikely to find the experience to be productive.

Despite emphasizing the need for reading and reflection in advance of a case discussion, there are instances where the instructor may occasionally have to orchestrate a discussion among students or institute participants who did not adequately prepare. If the instructor senses that there has been minimal (or no) advance preparation for the discussion, he or she may have to make fairly rapid adjustments, such as having participants take a few minutes to read (or reread) the case, discussing the case in small groups of two to six, or revising the teaching plan so that the case plays a less prominent role in the session and the role of relevant theory or supporting readings is emphasized instead. In situations such as this, the instructor should remind participants of the crucial role that advance preparation plays in an effective case discussion.

The Instructor’s Role in Case Teaching

The case teacher or discussion leader is “planner, host, moderator, devil’s advocate, fellow-student, and judge—a potentially confusing set of roles” (Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen, 1994, p. 23).

While teachers, faculty members, and instructors of all stripes have numerous styles and pedagogical approaches, the case teacher's function in the classroom remains somewhat unique.

In more traditional, lecture-based teaching, instructors serve primarily as purveyors of information and, to a certain extent, "experts" in the given subject matter. The "sage on the stage" metaphor has commonly been used to characterize this approach to teaching. A case teacher's primary function, by contrast, is to act as a skilled facilitator, breaking down barriers among students, making case discussions lively, and keeping the class on track. The traditional classroom hierarchy breaks down as instructors relegate control to students (Applegate, 1988). Applegate adds: "Traditional student-teacher roles, with their emphasis on hierarchy, are abandoned. Students assume responsibility for the learning environment" (p. 2). Boehrer (1996) agrees, noting that the students and teacher share "intellectual and procedural authority" during a case discussion (p. 1). Christensen (1991, in Barnes et al., 1994), widely regarded as one of the foremost experts on case teaching methodology, describes the unusual relationship among case teachers and students as a "partnership" and the class as a "learning community" (p. 25). He elaborates:

Effective discussion leadership, unlike lecturing, requires instructors to forge a primary alliance with students. We do not bring the material to them, but rather help them find their own ways to it. The subject matter defines the boundaries of our intellectual territory, but the students' unique intellects, personalities, learning styles, fears, and aspirations shape the paths they will take [p. 28].

Because the case teacher's role is unique, students, too, play a special role in relation to one another and their instructor. This somewhat unique classroom environment and the learning generated within it share little in common with what is generally found in standard, lecture-based settings.

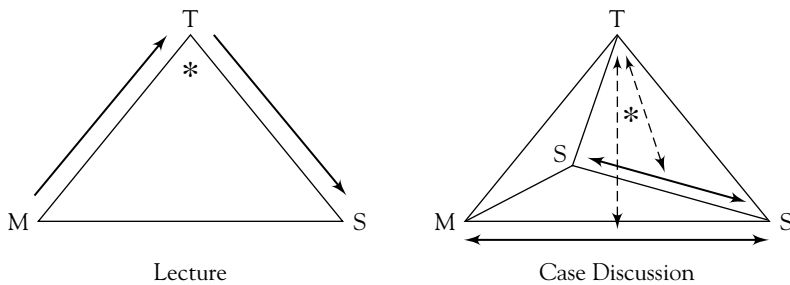


Figure 1.1. Comparison of the Functional Relationships Between Teacher, Students, and Course Material in Lecture and Case Discussion.

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As shown in Figure 1.1, Boehrer (1996) has created an effective schematic to illustrate the contrasting relationships among teacher, students, and case material in both a lecture- and case-based setting.

The teacher (T) stands between the material (M) and the students (S) in lecture. In case discussion, the students meet the material more directly, and they interact with each other as well. Teaching a case consists of managing those encounters toward purposeful ends and (as the two \longleftrightarrow lines suggest) of learning from them as well, about both the students and the case itself. While intellectual and procedural authority (*) belongs to the teacher in the lecture, teacher and students share it in case discussion. Both determine what is learned, and students, as well as teachers, can raise questions. As the scheme for case discussion suggests, the exercise is significantly more challenging and interesting.

The following activity can drive home the point that students in a case-based discussion have genuine authority.

Activity: Invite participants to picture themselves in the role of consultant to the case protagonist. The instructor should pose general questions such as: How would you advise the decision maker in this case? Which options are more desirable than others? Why? Alternatively, the instructor can invite the participants to convene small teams of consultants who would be asked to offer suggestions and recommendations to the decision makers in the case.

By taking on the role of experts, participants learn to value their own contributions and to see how their ideas would or would not play out successfully in practice.

Using Cases to Promote Student Learning in Multiple Ways

Students in higher education administration courses and related degree programs, and administrators who take part in case study discussions in executive education programs and professional development institutes, can learn from case studies in several ways. First, individual reading of and reflection on a particular case study enable participants to gain knowledge of both common and unusual administrative dilemmas in the higher education work environment: How does institution X handle the evaluation of tenured faculty? How does institution Y deal with budget shortfalls? When well-written, case studies can capture the complexity and context of the higher education environment, its multiple players (among them presidents, deans, department chairs, faculty members, students, and trustees), and long-ingrained conflicts and challenges (assessment, tenure, governance, student versus administrative versus faculty wants and needs, budget and finance strategies, and so on). Second, informal pre- and post-case discussion interactions with colleagues encourage participants to share not only their interpretations of the particular case study but also the expertise and knowledge they bring to the



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table from their personal and professional experiences. Finally, the case discussion itself, of course, provides one of the most valuable and powerful opportunities for learning. It is here where the instructor and the discussion participants collectively attempt to untangle the case study's multiple threads and analyze and assess its larger themes. An instructor's overall pedagogical goal in making any case discussion experience part of a course should be to maximize all of these opportunities to create a rich learning environment and engaging climate for class participants.

