Theme: Case Methods

The Early History of Case-Based Instruction: Insights for Teacher Education Today

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This examination of early efforts to use the case method of instruction in business and education at Harvard provides historical insights for those currently contemplating the use of cases in the education of teachers. Conceptual clarity about the purpose of case instruction and administrative and financial support for coordinated case writing by faculty are suggested as reasons why the method took hold in business but not in education.

> Fortunately, in spite of the fact that, from time to time, we chased false gods and had to retrace our steps, both the new curriculum and the case method of teaching business administration by using systematically arranged problems reported from life instead of lectures or textbooks worked well from the start. (Donham, 1941-1942, pp. 7-8)

The Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration wrote these words in the glow of hindsight some 35 years after the creation of the school with its singular dedication to the case method of instruction. At the same time that the business faculty developed their case curriculum, the education faculty considered and rejected the case method. I believe a brief examination of the early history of the case method in business and professional education at Harvard holds some insights for educators currently interested in case-based instruction in teacher education.

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Early History of the Case Method in Business and Professional Education

The historical roots of the case method in business education lie in the field of law. In 1870, under the guidance of Dean Christopher Columbus Langdell of the Harvard Law School, the faculty emphasized the analysis and discussion of individual cases by students in their training to become lawyers (Carter & Unklesbay, 1989). The objective of the method was to generalize particular decisions into broader understandings of the principles of law. Although initially viewed with skepticism by faculty at other law schools, over the next 30 years use of the method gradually spread. By 1915, it was employed in most of the well-known law schools in the country (Culbertson, Jacobson, & Reller, 1959).

Concurrent with the growth in popularity of the law school case method, the creation of a school of private business was under discussion in Harvard's Division of History and Political Science. The faculty recognized the apparent success of the method and sought to build on the law school's achievements. Harvard Professor (later president) A. Lawrence Lowell made the following suggestion in a letter to the committee charged with planning the curriculum of the new business school:

> I think we could learn a great deal from the most successful of our professional schools; that is, the Law School. Its success is, I think, due very largely to the fact that it takes men without any previous requirements, save a liberal education in any field, and then teaches them law, not jurisprudence; and it has been coming across my mind that, if we are to have a successful school of business, we must do the same thing....We must teach them business, not political economy. (Lowell, 1907)

In 1908, the Harvard Corporation formally established The Graduate School of Business Administration. Its curriculum was based on practice, and its instructional method was a case system emphasizing classroom discussion. Implementation of the case method during the school's first 10 years was notably slow. Unlike the situation at the Law School, ready-made case materials were unavailable. Faculty members lacked knowledge and expertise in this form of instruction. The appointment of Wallace B. Donham as dean of the school in 1919, however, breathed new life into the case method.

As a graduate of the Harvard Law School, Donham understood that school's case-based instruction. He also knew that the business curriculum needed its own form of case and a different instructional method. He argued that the business curriculum should emphasize a problem-centered approach based on real-life situations.

> The greater emphasis on the presentation of facts in problems used for teaching business as compared with our initial practice and with cases used in teaching law represents perhaps the most important development of the year in methods....In teaching business, practices and precedents have no weight of authority behind them, but every fact of business which can be brought in is an asset to the student, giving him a broader foundation for executive judgment. (Donham, 1920-1921, pp. 133-134)

Donham wanted to move fast, making a commitment to put all instruction at the school into a case-based format as soon as possible. He recognized that two key factors would ensure the successful implementation of the case method: putting together high quality teaching materials and supporting faculty to gain expertise in the teaching method.

To collect cases for the faculty, Donham established the Bureau of Business Research. For faculty support, he outlined a variety of activities, including meetings and teaching groups

> by which the best development in teaching, policy, course content, and point of view may be passed on to new men on the staff and interchanged among members of the staff. This could be done by frequent faculty lunches for the discussion of current problems, by systematic efforts to build up files of information in each course, and by reducing problems, valuable methods, and points of view to the form of written materials available for new men on the staff. (cited in Copeland, 1958, p. 78)

Donham's strategy was extremely effective. Within 4 years of his initial commitment to change the structure of instruction, "a high proportion of the courses in the school were transformed from lecture courses to discussion courses" (Copeland, 1954, p. 76).

Twelve years after the creation of the Harvard Business School, the Harvard Graduate School of Education was established with Henry W. Holmes as dean. Drawing from 30 years of experience as a division of education, the school sought to provide professional training for teachers and administrators, enrolling many experienced practitioners part-time. Although Holmes believed that the goal of professional training was to develop a "professional consciousness" through such courses as history, sociology, and philosophy, he was convinced that the best way to attract experienced teachers was to increase the curriculum's technical or practical offerings (Powell, 1980, p. 144). Holmes was eager to select faculty who would attract experienced students to the school, and he proposed three professorships stressing practical training in administration and secondary education. He saw less need to expand in the fundamental fields, a strategy that troubled President Lowell, who held serious concerns about the intellectual rigor of the school's proposed curriculum. Lowell vetoed Holmes's appointments, much to the surprise and embarrassment of the new dean.

President Lowell's vision for the newly created professional schools of education and business rested on his belief that knowledge in a professional field had to be a scholarly subject in itself (Powell, 1980). He believed that professional training that borrowed heavily academic course work from other fields or stressed practical techniques that could be gained through apprenticeships did not belong in the university. In the education curriculum, Lowell did not see the same level of intellectual demands he observed in the law and business schools. Therefore, in its formative years, the School of Education did not enjoy the respect and support given other professional schools.

Holmes and his colleagues made an effort to appease the president in the late 1920s by admitting young, inexperienced students to a 2-year master's degree program, a process that convinced Holmes that the Business School's approach to professional training held merit for education. The curricular reorganization that accompanied the change in focus from experienced teachers to younger preservice students occupied a great deal of faculty time. A faculty committee sought to build a core curriculum that would develop breadth of understanding and sound judgment. Holmes called for a curriculum with the ability to "transform novices into educators rather than mere craftsmen" (Powell, 1980, pp. 162-163), a goal whose specifics were not entirely clear, either to himself or to his faculty. During this period of reorganization, the faculty

> gave brief consideration to developing a unique method of instruction analogous to the case method. But even apart from its expense, the case method's applicability to education seemed limited. Some faculty members questioned the appropriateness of a method designed to teach decision making in a profession where the implementation of decisions was perhaps more difficult than the decision itself. (Powell, 1980, p. 166)

The faculty were not alone in their reservations about the case method. Continuing to worry about the intellectual rigor of the school and its programs, President Lowell doubted the relevance of the case method for education. Instead he thought that "educational principles were more likely to emerge from mathematical analysis of large numbers of examples than from detailed analyses of particular cases" (Powell, 1980, p. 166). Without the support of the president and the faculty, the method was not implemented.

Why Business and Not Education?

The case method of instruction succeeded in business education and failed in education for three important reasons: availability of resources, definition of research, and clarity of purpose. When Dean Donham proclaimed in 1920 that the curriculum of the Business School should be based on specific facts or problems, very few case materials existed. To develop them required large-scale studies and extensive faculty involvement. Business faculty rose to the challenge. Within 7 months, between November 1920 and July 1921, some 94,954 mimeographed sheets of problems were prepared for distribution (Donham, 1920-1921), a production underwritten by individual companies under study or professional organizations in a particular industry. Private industry, not the Business School, covered the initial costs of case production.

The Graduate School of Education did not have potential subjects and sites with discretionary funds. Public schools did not have the financial reserve of private industry. The external support Dean Holmes and his faculty needed to develop case materials in education was unavailable.

The Business School was also successful in its development of the case method because it defined case development and writing as research. Within the university and particularly in the eyes of President Lowell, the importance of research loomed large. From its inception, case material development at the Business School was coordinated by the Bureau of Business Research, a politically astute title for a case collection agency. Furthermore, at the Business School case development was part of the job. Faculty were expected to produce case materials and received compensation, both in pay and in rank, for their efforts.

Nothing similar existed at the School of Education, lending further credence to President Lowell's concerns about the level of intellectual rigor and research in education.

Another reason that case-based instruction succeeded in business and not in education was that business education proceeded with clear and unwavering purpose. Beginning with Dean Donham (and continuing to this day), there was a conviction that business administration was essentially a decision-making process. This belief conveniently matched the strengths of the case method of instruction, and the balance between instructional purpose and method gave coherence and cohesion to the use of cases.

In contrast, in education, faculty disagreed about the purpose and nature of their program. Some 6 years after its founding, the School of Education changed course dramatically, abandoning a successful program for part-time, older experienced practitioners in favor of young, inexperienced full-time students. Even Holmes wavered between a belief in the importance of studying history and philosophy and a recognition that courses in practical or technical skills attracted students.

Insights for Teacher Education

Although it is important to keep in mind the particularity of this example and the differences between education and business, the factors influencing early case development may offer some insight for teacher educators contemplating the case method of instruction.

Conceptual Orientation and Case Use

Teacher education programs in the 1990s reflect a variety of conceptual orientations and approaches to the education of prospective teachers. Feiman-Nemser (1990) identified five program orientations in teacher education: academic, practical, technological, personal, and critical/social. She argued that a specific conceptual orientation will influence the content and method of the program:

> A conceptual orientation includes a view of teaching and learning and a theory about learning to teach. Such ideas should give direction to the practical activities of teacher preparation such as program planning, course development, instruction, supervision, and evaluation. (p. 220)

For teacher educators contemplating the integration of cases into the curriculum, the program's conceptual orientation should influence their choice of cases—precisely the point that escaped the education faculty at Harvard in the 1920s. For example, some educators believe that the case method is useful in exploring the complex and messy problems of practice for which explicit theories do not exist. In this instance, the purpose of case study is to educate students in skills of analysis, decision making, and problem solving (Merseth, 1991a; Silverman, Welty, & Lyon, in press). This use of cases relates theory to practice through an inductive process and might be best used in a program that employs Feiman-Nemser's practical orientation to learning to teach.

Educators who use cases as specific examples of established theories see the cases as vehicles to explicate particular, preidentified themes or principles, to align the particular with the general (Broudy, Tozer, & Trent, 1986; Greenwood & Parkay, 1989), or to focus on "the most common experiences that teachers commonly face" (Kowalski, Weaver, & Henson, 1990, p. ix). This approach may fit most appropriately in a program that has a technological orientation with specific pre-identified skills as instructional objectives.

A third line of interpretation focuses on cases written for personal study and self-reflection (Kleinfeld, 1990; Richert, 1991) an approach that may be most beneficial in programs that stress a personal orientation to teaching with the teacher-learner at the center of the educational process.

Thus, as conceptual orientations differ, so should the uses and purposes of cases. Such diversity can be healthy for the field of teacher education, but only if educators—unlike their predecessors—clearly articulate the conceptual orientation and underlying philosophy of the program and then explicitly match this orientation with the types and purposes of the cases they use.

Contemporary teacher educators also can learn from the Business School the power of external resources to fuel case development efforts. Although education can never hope to match the resources of private business, the importance of external funding—through private foundations or the federal government—should not be overlooked. Similarly, recognition of case writing as a legitimate research endeavor, with appropriate rewards in the promotion system, is essential for future development activities (Merseth, 1991a).

Coordinating Materials Development

As faculty expand the use of cases in the teacher education curriculum, the initial actions of Dean Donham and the Bureau of Business Research offer instructive reference points, in particular, Donham's realization that the method would not thrive without adequate materials. The successful development of case materials in teacher education will rest on the dissemination of knowledge about case writing and on easy access to materials. Writing cases for use as instructional materials differs from traditional ethnographic case study research (Yin, 1989). Cases developed for instructional purposes often are narrative in form and include less explicit analysis and interpretation.

Writing cases is complex work. In an excellent article on the process, Hansen (1987) suggested:

> The secret of good case writing is...elusive. It involves recognizing the teachable moments in a series of events, encouraging informants to recollect them honestly...and then presenting them, as clearly and vividly as possible, in writing. (p. 264)

Case writing involves selection of the topic, collecting data, and presenting (in written or videotape form) the results. Some case writers work from an outline of guiding principles to assess potential topics and to guide data collection (Kleinfeld, 1990; Merseth, 1991b). Some writers, particularly those in business, suggest procedures for obtaining release, writing structures, and conventions of form and voice (Hansen, 1987; Leenders & Erskine, 1978; Towl, 1969). In general, the canon of good writing is an appropriate guide for case writers. Also, an important literature is available that alerts educators to such pitfalls as confidentiality, joint authorship, and ethical questions that arise in case development (Harrington, 1990; Kleinfeld, 1991; J. Kleinfeld, personal communication, May 1991).

Faculty must participate in the process of case development. Although graduate students can make significant contributions and gain valuable experience writing cases, a materials development program based solely on the efforts of graduate students may prove ineffective. The experience of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government offers a cautionary tale. When the school was founded in the 1960s, it invested heavily in the production of cases by graduate students. This well-financed effort resulted in unusable materials because of a lack of communication and coordination between the instructors and the case writers, who created materials that did not reflect the instructors' teaching objectives.

Apparently Dean Donham avoided this problem in the creation of business cases by involving instructors in the development effort from the start. In the Bureau of Business Research, he called for a "judicious combination of the efforts of the instructor and the research facilities" (Donham, 1920-21, p. 131). Developing usable materials requires not only ample funding but also active participation by the professors who will use the materials.

A central place for collecting existing materials in teacher education is another necessary step toward successful materials development. As the amount of case materials grows, the need for such a center becomes more acute. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and Division K of the American Educational Research Association are examples of national organizations that could provide organizing structures similar to the Bureau of Business Research at Harvard.

Faculty Support

One final insight from the early experience of business educators with the case method lies in the importance of supporting faculty who are attempting to teach in this new way. Donham's meetings and support activities for faculty to discuss teaching, course syllabi, and method formed the backbone of the implementation effort at the Harvard Business School, an effort that continues today. Teacher educators would benefit from a similar support system.

Teaching effectively by the case method is not a simple, automatic process (Christensen & Zaleznik, 1954; Christensen, 1987; Lyons, 1989). "Case teaching is deceptively difficult" (Sykes, 1989, pp. 12-13). The demands and intricacies of the pedagogy are formidable because of the multiple levels of interaction between the material and students, among students and instructor, and among students themselves.

The multiple interactions require intellectual structures that include conceptual, pedagogical, social, and cognitive levels (Sykes, 1989). Welty (1989) suggested that faculty preparing to teach with cases produce an outline of concepts and subconcepts that meshes carefully with a prepared question outline, and he urged instructors to begin their preparation by answering a key question "Why did I assign this case?" In addition, because cases are written to be taught in carefully organized discussions, the instructor must consider not only the content of the case, but the discussion process itself (Lang, 1986; Merseth, 1991a). If possible, novice case instructors should observe experienced colleagues teach the same or similar cases, use videotaping, or establish a faculty teaching discussion group. In the end, novice case instructors should heed the words of an experienced case instructor: "Almost anyone can become an effective case teacher with enough devotion, concentration, and hard work" (Shapiro, 1984, p. 2).

Curricular questions about cases also require consideration by faculty. Should courses be entirely case-based? If so, which courses? How can cases be used as effective supplements? What method of assessment of student learning is most appropriate for case-based courses? These and other curricular questions require deliberation by teacher educators before courses are implemented (Merseth, 1991c). Working conferences and on-campus support groups provide useful initial forums for these discussions (Commonwealth Center for the Education of Teachers, 1991; Hutchings, 1991).

Summary

Issues of implementation are important to the successful introduction of a case-based pedagogy in teacher education. The experiences of business educators in materials development efforts and faculty support offer possible insights for teacher educators. Though in a different field and an earlier time period, the experiences of Dean Donham and his business colleagues may help teacher educators avoid unnecessary obstacles. Perhaps, in another 35 years teacher educators will be able to write, as Donham did in 1940, about the successful implementation of case-based instruction.

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