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# Developing Case Studies to Prepare Reading Educators

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The case study as a research design and the case study as a method of instructional strategy have had a long and robust history in numerous academic disciplines. In 1871, professors at Harvard University Law School began using case studies to prepare future lawyers (Carter & Unklesbay, 1989). Other law schools quickly followed the lead, establishing a tradition of case studies for instructional purposes in legal education. Then, in 1910, the Harvard University School of Business initiated the use of case studies to prepare future businessmen to meet the rough-and-tumble challenges of the business world (Christensen & Hansen, 1987). Professors in the schools of medicine followed with case studies to train future doctors. In recent years, case studies as teaching tools have been widely used by professors in many different disciplines.

I have several purposes for writing this paper. First, I want to present clearly a distinction between the case study as research and the case study as method. I discuss the confusions that exist between the two in education. To achieve this purpose, I identify and describe the characteristics of case study as a research design. Being aware of the characteristics of a case study enables an investigator to discover and understand highly complex contextual situations. Additionally, I identify several reasons for using what we will consistently term the case method to prepare preservice reading teachers for the contingencies they will encounter in the classroom as they deliver reading instruction. My position is that case study research should be implemented to develop cases that can be used in the application of the case method as an instructional strategy in professional reading education. Case studies

and the case study method are not the same and they are not to be confused as being the same, but there is a significant relationship between the two.

### Confusions About Case Studies in Education

Recently, the term "case study" has been associated with professional teacher education (Greenwood & Parkay, 1989; Henson, 1988; Kowalski, Weaver & Henson, 1990; Shulman & Colbert, 1987). Descriptions of case studies and prescriptions for using case studies in education have become frequent content in professional teacher education books and journals. The assimilation of the terminology associated with case studies has not been without problems, however. Teacher educators have used "case study" to describe a variety of activities including a research design, procedures that follow a diagnosis, and a method or technique of teaching or tracing the past of a person, group, or institution. There appears to be little consensus among education professionals about what constitutes the meaning of the term "case study" (Merriam, 1988). Teacher educators make little distinction between the various activities that such separate terms as *casework*, *case method*, *case history*, and *case study* designate.

Much confusion exists from education professionals using such terms interchangeably, confusion which should be eliminated. Case study research is not the same as casework, or the case method, or a case history. Casework denotes "the developmental, adjustment, remedial, or corrective procedures that appropriately follow diagnosis of the causes of maladjustment" (Good & Scates, 1954, p. 729). Reading professors engaged in teaching courses about the diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties are familiar with the concept and procedures of casework. Case method, on the other hand, is an instructional technique educators use to present the major ingredients of a case study to students in order to illustrate a teaching situation or phenomenon or to provide problem-solving experiences. As an instructional technique, the case method is used to establish a framework for students to contemplate, discuss, and debate problematic instructional situations (Yin, 1984). Shulman (1990) and Broudy (1990) advocate the use of the case method for instructional purposes, and each is involved in the process of developing case studies to be used in case method instruction. Case histories are used in much the same way that casework is used, to facilitate service to a patient or client. Educators must recognize and maintain the distinctions inherent in the separate definitions of case study and case method in order to foster an understanding of the functions and eliminate the confusions about the two different concepts.

## Case Study Research Design

Case study research is part of the qualitative research paradigm. Unlike investigators who employ quantitative methods and focus their attention on identifying the single objective reality of a situation, investigators employing qualitative methods attempt to discover multiple realities within a particular context (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Investigators employing qualitative research designs, such as case study designs, see the world not as an objective thing but as a function of personal insight, interpretation, and perception. Frequently, but not always, an investigator identifies a particular dilemma as the central focus of a case study research design. All methods for gathering data about the dilemma are acceptable to the qualitative investigator. That is, an investigator may use a test, a survey, an observation, or an interview. Certain techniques, such as interviewing and observing, however, are used more often than other techniques as an investigator develops a case study.

Merriam (1988) identifies four essential properties of a case study: particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive. A discussion of these essential properties provides a clear distinction between case studies and other endeavors such as casework and the case method. A case study is particularistic because the focus of the study is on a particular situation, event, entity, or phenomenon. The investigator must incorporate into the case history of the dilemma within the contextual setting. Also, the investigator must show the immediacy of the dilemma to indicate why the moment is important. Likewise, the investigator must account for simultaneity by describing all that is going on in the contextual environment. Shaw (1978, p. 2) states that case studies "concentrate attention on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation. They are problem centered, small scale, and entrepreneurial endeavors."

While conducting case study research, an investigator concentrates on a single situation or phenomenon to discover significant factors characteristic of the situation or phenomenon within a particular context. The goal of the investigator is to seek a holistic description and explanation of the phenomenon under study. The investigator is not intent on prescribing an answer to a problem or situation. On the contrary, the investigator seeks to describe the complexity of a particular phenomenon using literary techniques to elicit images and analyze situations (Wilson, 1979). The intent of a case study investigator is to provide descriptions of the participants' cognitive features and to describe the elements of the culture as the features and elements interact in a particular contextual setting.

A case study is descriptive when an investigator offers what Geertz (1973) calls "thick description" of the phenomenon in a particular contextual setting. Thick description is a complete, literal description of the phenomenon under study. The description is usually stated in qualitative language, usually unencumbered by quantitative data or quantitative language. Cronbach (1975, p. 123) states that case study research is differentiated from other research designs by "interpretation in context." The investigator offers a multidimensional view, including not only the dimensions of the teaching and learning environment but also the social aspects of the setting.

Merriam (1988) also identifies a case study as heuristic. Merriam states that investigators employing a case study research design "illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study. They can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience or confirm what is known" (p. 13). Characteristics and variables previously unknown about a phenomenon emerge in the description and cause readers to develop new understandings about the phenomenon. Additionally, readers gain new insights into how phenomena get to be as they are.

Merriam (1988) identifies the final essential property of a case study as its being inductive. Investigators using case study research designs rely upon inductive reasoning. The investigators do not enter a context with preconceived hypotheses about how the situation will look or be. Rather, case study investigators describe concepts and formulate generalizations based on the data grounded in the particular contextual environment. The concepts and generalizations emerge from the data.

I believe there are some additional salient considerations in the implementation of a case study research design. One particular bias I have as regards the development of a case study in education is that the case must be based on actual observations of a classroom dilemma. The observations must be context bound. Only when the actual classroom is the setting can a full understanding of a dilemma be attained. Dilemmas do not occur isolated from reality. Dilemmas are part of reality. Cases created from armchairs lack the contextual essence surrounding the dilemma. Also, the descriptions concocted of the contextual setting tend to be muted and fail to provide a believable picture of the teaching dilemma. Direct observation is required to fully understand the dilemma in context. Contextual elements cannot be omitted without changing the dilemma. The actual development of classroom-based cases provides investigators with excellent opportunities to enter into collaborative relationships with classroom teachers.

## Case Method and Teaching

At the center of a case study is a dilemma, a problem that needs to be resolved. The case method is an instructional technique whereby students are exposed to a dilemma and encouraged to develop hypotheses for resolving its central problem. A case study is not a prescription or a list of things for the reader to do. Rather, it represents a description of cognitive features and elements of culture from a particular contextual setting for the reader to make decisions about.

Teaching and learning are complex processes. As our knowledge about teaching continues to grow, preparing teachers to teach cannot be accomplished simply through the presentation of techniques and methods. Preservice teachers, lacking teaching experience, do not know what techniques and methods to assimilate. Additionally, observations of classrooms and teaching behaviors have not proved successful for preparing teachers. Participation in classrooms does not provide prospective teachers with opportunities to make decisions or to understand what making decisions entails. The preservice teacher's schema is not sufficiently developed concerning teaching and learning to support observation/participation as the sole means to learn what a teacher does—make decisions. What is needed is an approach that is cognitively oriented and supports a belief that knowledge is constructed, transformed, and evolving. The approach must begin with the development and acquisition of schemata, knowledge structures, that set the novice apart from the expert (Carter & Doyle, 1987). The approach must go beyond the traditional presentation of declarative knowledge, the “what” of teaching, and procedural knowledge, the “how” of teaching, to incorporate the conditional knowledge of teaching—conditional knowledge that addresses what works when, with what students, under what conditions, and in what settings. The case method can accomplish these goals.

I believe the case method encourages and even forces preservice teachers to think like a teacher. The case method provides students with opportunities to see context specificity of teaching. It also provides context-bound knowledge. Preservice teachers see and are given opportunities to react to scenes and situations they are likely to encounter as they teach. Schemata development is a potent aid to prospective teachers. The case method provides students with opportunities to develop numerous schemata related to teaching. Teachers learn to recognize events, understand the events, and devise sensible and educative ways to make decisions and act. Finally, I also believe the case method allows preservice teachers to consider relevant factors, reflect on alternative approaches, and draw on diverse knowledge from education, thus becoming cognizant of their own preconceptions.

## Conclusion

The case study research design and the case method used together can offer reading educators unlimited opportunities to take contextually significant classroom phenomena and use them for instructional purposes. I believe case studies have great potential for preparing reading teachers to deal with dilemmas that have plagued reading teachers for years—grouping, the unmotivated reader, the reader experiencing difficulty, and basal reader instruction to mention just a few.

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