

Case-Method Learning:

Online Exploration and Collaboration for Multicultural Education

Marsha Gartland, University of Virginia

Teresa Field, Johns Hopkins University

Increasing standardization and multiple layers of accountability spelled out in local and national education policy today call for a more complex understanding of multiculturalism and its relevance to education. As schools become more diverse, educators must rededicate to ensure equity and social justice, creating opportunities for every student to achieve to his or her fullest, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or any other identity around which academic achievement gaps presently revolve. Teacher educators and staff developers face this challenge of preparing teachers to confront the array of educational, social, and moral problems and to do so in a rapidly expanding electronic environment. Two recent innovations in teacher education--case-method pedagogy and online course delivery--offer promising possibilities for addressing these challenges. This article describes the application of such innovations in pre-service and in-service learning experiences, combining case methods, online learning, and multicultural education.

The Case Method

Real-life scenarios are at the heart of case studies. In the education milieu, these problem-centered stories can focus on issues related to teaching and learning in classroom situations, education policy conflicts, relationships between colleagues, parents, or administrators, and other complex challenges and opportunities. These “slices

of life” are considered “cases” because of the theories and principles imbedded in the narratives. L. Shulman (1992) argues that a “case” needs to be an instance of a larger class or an example of a broader category—“a case of something.” Typically, expert analyses assuming various perspectives accompany cases and suggest that there are no “right” answers, but instead a variety of acceptable perspectives that teachers can assume as they learn to make thoughtful, reasoned, ethical decisions about teaching and learning.

Case methods are typically used in professions in which complex interactions require professionals to exercise judgment rather than to apply rules and principles in prescriptive ways. Used widely in law, business, and medicine, the case method is just recently beginning to take root in teacher education. This method is used to contextualize knowledge that students typically receive in a linear, fragmented way through separate courses during their teacher preparation. Case studies encourage a vibrant connection between theory and practice--one that is often missing in lecture and textbook learning--inviting solutions that must be found by an interactive consideration of means and ends. Because cases are based in practical reality, they also lend credibility and relevance to contemporary education issues while helping users build problem solving skills.

Studies have demonstrated that teachers who participate in case-method learning are better at identifying problems, designing educational interventions to address them, and evaluating the effects of their teaching (Bronack, 1998; Imig, in press; Kilbane, 2000; Welty, Silverman, & Lyon, 1991). A recent study of online and face-to-face offerings of case-based courses also suggests that live and virtual delivery are equally as effective for promoting the moral development of teachers who entered the treatment with relatively

low moral reasoning skills (Gartland, in press). Continuing examination of curricula and research on case pedagogy and teacher development will reveal more about how participants extract meaning from their experience.

Moral Reasoning and Critical Reflection: The Need for the Case Method

The emergence of considerable discourse avowing the moral basis of teaching suggests that teaching is among the most morally demanding of all professions (Goodlad, 1990; Strike and Soltis, 1992). The cognitive developmental theorists define moral reasoning as evaluative judgment, requiring the explicit application of an individual's values about human welfare and social justice. Current research and theory on the subject of moral reasoning differs from previous eras in a few significant ways. Current moral dialog is (a) grounded in a cognitive developmental view of morality rather than a values oriented approach, (b) focused on the abilities of the individual rather than the institutional level of schooling, and (c) supported by objective, empirically-based research (Bergem, 1990).

Models of reflective practice in teaching range from "technical," involving general instruction and management issues, to "critical," involving social, moral, and political concerns (Valli, 1997). Teachers who are able to reflect critically consider the aim of understanding and improving quality of life for disadvantaged groups as primary, and are committed to unlimited inquiry, fundamental self-criticism, and social action (Valli, 1997). This level of reflection is understood as the intersection of reflection and morality.

Zeichner and Liston (1987) distinguished between preservice teachers who are trained as technicians concerned with application of teaching methods and those who are

educated as moral craftpersons concerned with ethical considerations for actions. They discovered that concrete cognitive models used to assess lower levels of teacher reflection are not adequate for assessing critical reflection or moral reasoning, and suggested studying these as separate phenomena altogether.

Empirical research made employing the moral reasoning measures of Kohlberg and James Rest allowed cognitive developmental theory to traverse the divide that historically has separated the “philosophy of morality” from the “science of practice” (Reiman, 1999). Kohlberg and his colleagues developed a systematic stage framework of human development, the Moral Judgment Inventory (MJJ), to measure individuals’ moral judgment proficiency. Kohlberg refers to the process of moral reasoning as the ability to place one’s self empathetically in the shoes of another and to make decisions according to democracy and justice. Kohlberg traces the evolution of one’s meaning making on questions of rights and justice from pre-conventional concerns with obedience and punishment (stage 1 and 2-focus on self) to conventional concerns with duty and behavior norms of one’s social group (stage 3 and 4-focus on group) to post-conventional moral thinking that takes principled human values as the basis of moral judgment (stages 5 and 6-focus on inner self) (Kohlberg, 1984).

Studies of teachers’ moral reasoning levels, unsettling decades of educational research, has yielded a consistent pattern: Teachers’ ability to engage in moral reasoning is markedly lower than that of other professionals (Rest, 1986). The research suggests that some teachers are morally principled thinkers and can construct and reconstruct progressive democratic environments in their classrooms, although most cannot. Those who process moral judgment issues at less complex levels are more rigid and

authoritarian than those who process such issues at more complex levels (Sprinthall et al., 1996).

Research also indicates that teachers who are taught how to be reflective can engage in more culturally appropriate teaching and more readily take responsibility for classroom challenges rather than blaming their students (Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1988; Reiman, 1999; Sprinthall & Thies-Sprinthall, 1983). Critical reflection not only allows practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of practice, but also permits them to analyze moral and ethical classroom issues through a structured process (Clift, Houston & Puguch, 1990). Most education program designers have found that while it is relatively easy to promote technical reflection, it is difficult to foster critical reflection (Sparks-Langer et al., 1990). Developing a critically reflective stance requires active engagement or consciousness in the experience. It requires the ability to analyze and prioritize issues, to use tacit and research-based knowledge, and to develop a feasible plan of action—all of which are embodied in the case-method approach.

Case Method Learning: Promoting Reflection and Moral Reasoning

“The part of the course that I will probably continue to use the most is the case analysis process. I now do “case analysis” every week as I work with my students and try to meet their needs. I really like breaking it down into the categories of Issues, Perspectives, Knowledge, Actions, and Consequences. This is a terrific approach to a situation and I will continue to implement in my classroom.” –Participant in online course, The Special Learner

At least since Dewey’s *How We Think* (1933), educators and psychologists have grappled with questions of how people learn from experience, and how to identify experiences that are educative. Dewey theorized that, without reflection, no learning occurs. Experiences themselves are not learning—but opportunities for learning through

adequate reflection. The case analysis process bridges this gap, providing guidelines and a framework for exploring issues that might cause discomfort, and almost always lead to critical reflection. Considering case issues and confronting personal beliefs and understandings can bring about changes related to practice and cultural understanding.

Dewey and other practical theorists such as Lev Vygotsky (1986) translated developmental theory to teacher education practices, stressing the importance of role-taking, active participation in “real-world” activities, discourse, and social interaction in development. According to Vygotsky (1986), the critical combination for self development includes requiring students to both experience a real-world teaching/learning situation as it is, not necessarily as it should be, as well as engage in a process of examining their own and others’ educational views (in Houser & Chevalier, 1996). All developmental theorists agree that learning begins with a knowledge disturbance. This “perturbation” has prompted numerous studies to identify elements and conditions necessary for such growth. Proponents of a cognitive-developmental approach to teacher education have begun to build on the work of Piaget, Dewey, Kohlberg and others to more effectively structure and sequence learning to promote cognitive development.

“Dilemma discussion” is the technique most often recommended for facilitating this “perturbation” and the development of moral reasoning and reflection (Reiman, 1999; Schlaefli et al, 1985). Dilemma discussion, better known as “case discussions” or “case-method learning” provides a vehicle to investigate the multi-focal dilemmas of education. This approach is considered effective for promoting the moral development of teachers as they are often not aware of the moral impact of their actions, and report

feeling ill-prepared for dealing with the moral dilemmas they identify in their work (Tirri, 1999).

While methods of teaching cases vary, consistent components include reflection and analysis. Case analysis as a professional development strategy creates opportunities for inservice teachers to link theory and practice, explore morals and ethics, and become more capable problem-solvers. As teachers confront different values, they develop a process of inquiry-oriented teaching that may become a consistent teaching behavior. Cases provide a glimpse into urban schools for teachers from the suburbs and illustrate issues of multicultural education to teachers from schools that are not seemingly diverse. Students, teachers, administrators, and parents often approach education with different values and different goals. Teachers using cases learn to respect the legitimacy of these different opinions and to recognize the impact their personal perspective has on the formation of their beliefs and attitudes.

The ability to develop well-reasoned solutions to recurring and emerging professional problems is an important goal for professional education. While teacher preparation courses typically focus on the acquisition of concepts, there is a real need for programs that help prospective teachers analyze and solve authentic professional problems. Instruction without measures that help teachers see their strengths and shortcomings and compare them to peers as well as to seasoned and exemplary colleagues is unlikely to promote competence (Bebeau et al., 1999).

CaseNEX: A Model Program for Case Learning in Education

Key Constructs for Online Case Learning: Discussion and Collaboration

“There was a lot of diversity among the teachers taking this course. We ranged from elementary through high school level teachers, and taught in most every discipline. We all had classes comprised of students from a variety of backgrounds. By participating in class discussions, we had the opportunity create a microcosm of the course, providing an environment for learning that was multicultural. Through class discussion, the materials became three-dimensional, and offered an opportunity to grow both as students and as teachers. The anonymous nature of being online really let people speak the truth; this truth allows for personal exploration and real life thinking.” –Participant in online course, Multicultural Studies

CaseNEX (originally “CaseNET”), a project incorporating the case method in an online environment, was founded at the University of Virginia. CaseNEX’s online case studies and courses depict the complex problems and opportunities teachers face daily. The courses and professional development programs offered support increased professional knowledge, heightened problem solving skills, and the purposeful use of technology. This approach has been used to help teachers identify opportunities through the examination of educational problems by training them to break down complex issues, consider multiple perspectives, examine data, develop action plans, and anticipate consequences.

The pedagogical foundation of the CaseNEX approach is the employment of a reflective process for developing habits of professional thinking through case analysis (McNergney, Herbert, & Ford, 1994; McNergney & Medley, 1984). This conceptual framework for the analysis of the online case studies is neither conceptually discreet nor rigidly sequential. Rather, throughout the course, students practice the analysis process through journaling and discussing (online or face-to-face) cases with their peers and instructor. A final written assignment requires students to construct analyses that demonstrate that they can effectively: (1) identify educational issues, problems, or opportunities; (2) recognize different perspectives or values that drive people’s actions;

(3) call up personal, theoretical, and empirical knowledge relevant to issues identified; (4) propose possible actions for handling the issues identified; and (5) forecast the likely consequences of such actions. The analyses should include an examination of ways in which the participant's biases and prejudices shape the way they understand the case and their own practice. As a result, participants are more adequately prepared for the challenges they will face in their teaching.

Basic research on case-method learning has provided educators with a solid set of directing constructs on which CaseNEX and similar programs are built. When placed within an online environment, these constructs interact with the interactive opportunities afforded by Internet technologies to weave unique educational opportunities.

The recognition of different values and actions are what make cases rich and successful teaching tools. In Piagetian terms, the balance between discomfort and safety allows participants to confront, rather than avoid, established beliefs, biases, and stereotypes (Houser & Chevalier, 1996). Piaget's conception of cognitive development entails a process that leads people to reflect on the conflict and then achieve equilibrium by the construction of new level of understanding within their existing system of thought. Vygotsky (1986), reversing the order of development, writes that the true direction of the thinking "is not from the individual to the social but from the social to the individual" (in Tappan, 1997). He theorizes that peer interaction not only initiates change, but shapes the nature of change as well, as peers internalize cognitive processes that are implicit in interactions and communication with others (Tappan, 1997). Both theorists consider the role of the group and social interactions in the development of thinking in cognitive,

moral and social domains. Although their ideas differ slightly, both offer a rationale as to why discussion is an important factor to consider in studying teachers' thinking.

Crucial to the research in teacher discussion and reflection is the awareness of competing perspectives, according to Perry (1970). Reciprocity, a defining characteristic of better-quality and evidence of maturing communication skills, implies attention paid by one or more participants to what others say. Taking reciprocity to the next level, a dialectical style of thought is achieved by encouraging students to recognize and seek validity in other perspectives. Berkowitz and Gibbs (1983) found that there is a relationship between transactive features of students' discourse and gains in moral reasoning. Rather than merely providing consecutive assertions, discussants operate on each other's reasoning, confronting one another in an ongoing dialogic dynamic.

A case study, when analyzed and discussed in an online environment, allows for this dynamic, as students are challenged to consider the various ideas and perspectives of their peers. Dialogue and collaboration are central to this online approach, as participants can engage in an on-going process of reviewing and responding to comments and questions posed by the facilitator as well as classmates. As the discussion flows in several directions, facilitators can guide the focus of the analysis to circle back, extending various perspectives and implications. Structural growth does not come cheaply, as the move to more complex levels can involve significant "personal loss" (Sprinthall et al., 1996). But with well-trained instructors who can offer the support and extension necessary to deal with this "loss," participants may be more open to continued opportunities for growth when the course is over.

Using case-based instruction online also allows course facilitators to differentiate instruction based on the developmental needs of each participant (e.g., student teachers, beginning teachers, or experienced colleagues), perhaps drawing on the work of David Hunt (1974) who identified the need to systematically vary the amount of structure depending on the needs of the learner. He suggested differentiated needs as (1) concrete or abstract, (2) immediate reinforcement or spread out, (3) numerous or few advance organizers, and (4) focused or extended assignments. In addition, the technology that supports the courses allows participants to explore the cases, video perspectives from experts in the field, and relevant readings at their own pace. While this provides maximum flexibility and the ability to differentiate instruction, the collaborative, online discussions and one-on-one journal interactions with an instructor provides the most powerful opportunities for development.

Extending on the weekly discussion interactions among peers, an online journal provides a forum in which to integrate and synthesize the materials and interactions surrounding the case study and to prepare participants for formal case analysis assignments. Participants are asked to draw on personal experiences, and are encouraged to examine ways in which their own prejudices, biases, and assumptions influence understanding of the cases, readings, their students, and teaching. The journal may become a log of a participant's growth throughout a course and evidence that sustained inquiry of one's professional practice and dispositions often promotes significant growth.

The online nature of case-based courses also allows participants from a wide variety of situations and experiences to share ideas and debate in a low-risk environment. The time independence of online discussion groups and one-on-one journals with

instructors creates opportunities to communicate their perspectives about their shared case experiences. Participants practice moving beyond their own frame of reference, making meaning in ways that may be more open, inclusive, and integrated than many face-to-face interactions. For these reasons, online discussions that encourage the true sharing of ideas amongst essentially equal partners are likely to be a fruitful way of encouraging people to test assumptions and develop thinking.

Conclusion

The counterintuitive coming together of greater student diversity and greater educational standardization draws forth the need for innovative approaches for teacher preparation. Though more research must be done to measure the ultimate and long-term effectiveness of the case study method, including its online application, current philosophy and studies indicate that the employment of cases in teacher preparation can be as valuable as it is in law, business, and other fields. By providing an opportunity to bridge theory and practice, share and be challenged by diverse perspectives, and solve the sorts of problems they will face in their own classrooms, the case method has the potential to better prepare participants for the complexity of today's education milieu. By combining the power of the case method with the unique characteristics of an online environment, CaseNEX and other programs are poised prepare teachers to think and act critically toward a multicultural education end.

References

- Bronack, S. C. (1998). Analyzing multimedia cases: Teacher development in a Web based environment. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
- Bebeau, M., Rest, J. R. & Narvaez, D. (1999). Beyond the promise: A framework for research in moral education. *Educational Researcher*, 28(4), 18-26.
- Clift, R., Houston, W., & Pugach, M. (1990). *Encouraging reflective practice in education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How We Think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Boston: D.C. Heath.
- Gartland (2003). CaseNEX evaluation data. Unpublished manuscript, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
- Goodlad, J. (1990). *Teachers for our nation's schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Houser, N., & Chevalier, M. (1996). Multicultural self-development in the preservice classroom: Equity education in the dominant culture. Delaware, MD.
- Hunt, D.E. (1974). *Matching models in education*. Toronto, Canada: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
- Imig (2003). CaseNEX evaluation data. Unpublished manuscript, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
- Kilbane, C. R. (2000). Preservice teachers' use of multimedia cases. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). Moral stages and moralization: The cognitive-developmental approach. In L. Kohlberg (Ed.), *Essays on moral development: The psychology of moral development* (pp. 170-205). San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- McNergney, R.F., & Medley, D.M. (1984). Teacher evaluation. In J.M. Cooper (Ed.) *Developing Skills for Instructional Supervision*. New York: Longman Inc., 147-178.
- McNergney, R. F., Herbert, J. M., & Ford, R. E. (1994). Co-operation and competition in case-based teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(5), 339-345.
- Noordhoff, K & Kleinfeld, J. (1988). Rethinking the rhetoric of 'Reflective Inquiry' in teacher education Programs. In H. Waxman et al., (eds.), *Images of Reflection in Teacher Education*, Virginia: ATE, 27-30.

- Perry, W. G. (1970). *Forms of ethical and intellectual development in the college years: A scheme*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Reiman, A.J. (1999). The evolution of the social roletaking and guided reflection framework in teacher education: Recent theory and quantitative synthesis of research. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 15(6), 597-612.
- Rest, J.R. (1986). *Moral development: Advances in research and theory*. New York: Praeger.
- Schlaefli, A., J. R. Rest, and S. J. Thoma. (1985). "Does moral education improve moral judgment? A meta-analysis of intervention studies using the Defining Issues Test." *Review of Educational Research* 55: 319–352.
- Shulman, L. S. (1992). Toward a pedagogy of cases. In J. H. Shulman (Ed.), *Case methods in teacher education* (pp. 254). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Sprinthall, N.A., Reiman, A.J., & Thies-Sprinthall, L. (1996). Teacher professional development. In J. Sikula (Ed.), *Second handbook of research on teacher education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Sprinthall, N.A. & Thies-Sprinthall, L. (1983). The need for theoretical frameworks in educating teachers: A cognitive developmental process. In K. Howey and W. Garner (Eds.), *Education of teachers: A look ahead*, (pp.74-97). New York: Longman.
- Strike, K. A., & Soltis, J. F. (1992). *The ethics of teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Tappan, M. (1997). Language, culture, and moral development: A Vygotskian perspective. *Developmental Review*, 17, 78-100.
- Tirri, K. (1999) Teachers' perceptions of moral dilemmas at school. *Journal of Moral Education*, 28(1), 31-47.
- Valli, L. (1997). "Listening to other voices: A description of teacher reflection in the United States." *Peabody Journal of Education*, 71(1): 67-88.
- Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Welty, W. H., Silverman, R., & Lyon, S. (1991). Student outcomes from teaching with cases. Unpublished manuscript, Pace University, Center for Case Studies in Teacher Education, White Plains, NY.
- Zeichner, K. M. and D. P. Liston (1987). "Teaching student teachers to reflect." *Harvard Education Review* 57: 1-22.