Case Writing: Learning through Constructive Reflection

Rosemary B. Closson
University of South Florida

Carmeda Stokes
University of South Florida

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Rosemary B. Closson, Ph.D. & Carmeda Stokes, Ph.D. student
University of South Florida

Abstract: Case-based and problem-based learning are seldom discussed in regard to their use in adult education practitioner preparation. Here researchers discuss a process called "case construction" as a means for master's students to learn effective management principles.

Fenwick (2002) noted that "[f]ew programs employ PBL [problem-based learning] in graduate education, and little research focuses on mid-career professionals and PBL"… (p.7). Although, there is some evidence of PBL being used in the health professions (Herron & Major, 2002; Ryan & Marlow, 2004) there is little evidence of PBL, the case method or case study being used in graduate adult education programs where ostensibly one would expect both case study and/or PBL to be evident as they represent applied experiential learning theory. We define experiential learning in the constructivist sense where we assume an individual can construct meaning(s) from their experience and is able to objectify their assumptions about a given circumstance or situation. Case study and PBL are often spoken of in the same breath despite the fact that ideally PBL is a circumstance where the problem is presented before the concepts; the concepts are learned as students attempt to solve the problem.

In our study, we introduced a process we refer to as "constructive reflection" to a program management course required for master's students. By constructive reflection we mean a step-wise process designed to assist the students in deeper and more personalized engagement with course concepts beyond the text and class discussion. The steps in this process included: in-class case-story writing (an adaptation of Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman in Galbraith, 1998), on-line journaling, and field research which culminates in a personalized case study built by the student. In the second class meeting students were asked to spend 10 minutes writing a case story. In the story they identified characters facing a conflict or a crucial decision. Our preference was that the student be a central protagonist in the story or had observed the incident. Once written, students shared their stories in groups of two or three; each member was asked to listen and then frame the central issues in their peer's story. The purpose of this step was for students to begin the conceptualization of a management issue from multiple perspectives and to realize management issues as multi-leveled. Students then placed their story in an on-line journal.

Next, after key course concepts were presented, students were asked to reflect back on their case stories and write a management case based on this situation. Constructing a case required students to revisit a meaningful, personal management situation in the past involving a conflict or where a crucial decision had to be made and to explore the issue further by conducting field research including interviewing key personnel connected with the incident. (Permission for this field based research was granted at all sites.) The learner's goal was to construct a case linked to relevant course concepts as a means of deepening personal understanding within a familiar context.

Preliminary feedback from students about the process was very positive. One student's comment expressed the purpose we hoped the case story would serve. He wrote:

> *I found that just discussing my case [story] with another classmate was very helpful. Reading it out loud gave me a chance to really think about the entire situation and create a vision. The direction my case study was going to take was also shaped. It also helped me remember a lot of points that I forgot to write down in the 10 minutes we had to write our thoughts* (1/18/08).

Students also gave specific feedback to their peers concerning what to avoid in writing their case and, at times, offered solutions about how the incident should have been handled from a management perspective. Additionally, students identified multiple course concepts as relevant and useful in understanding their case. One student identified the "left-hand column" i.e. the unspoken conversations between people that often influence behavior as a helpful concept. The lack of manager mentoring was described by several students as a relevant concept along with reflective listening, and managers' inability to provide appropriate feedback. One student wrote:

> *He [manager] violated all of the guidelines for giving feedback. He not only gave negative feedback, but it was very accusatory. The feedback was given in the open and not in private. No feedback was given on positive behaviors and he did not give the receiver time to respond* (2/5/08).

The course has not ended so final learning outcomes are as yet unclear but we have identified ways to address some of the challenges we uncovered thus far. We propose the following modifications to enhance the student learning experience as well as facilitate the instructional process. First, provide a detailed template outlining the framework for the case study assignment early in the semester. Although we provided such a template towards the middle of the semester, we found that some students might have benefited from more structured guidance earlier in the process. Once the template was provided, students commented it did in fact assist them with writing the key elements/components of their case study. Second, have students develop a timeline for their case study project. It is intended that this would provide some level of accountability on the students part as well as provide a bridge for content that will be discussed later in the semester (such as project management). Third, when administering the case story exercise, allow students to submit an overview of their individual problems online for peer review prior to initial group discussion. This would allow peers adequate time to prepare questions for clarification and offer helpful feedback regarding the case. Finally, we suggest planning for peer coaching opportunities throughout the case construction process. We believe it would be beneficial to have students plan time for peer coaching regarding the progress of their case study at least twice during the semester in order to enhance the writing process and generate additional discussion of case material. Students potentially would gain additional insights from group dialogue (as was evidenced in team case analysis assignments).

References

Fenwick, T. (2002). Problem-based learning, group process and the mid-career professional: Implications for graduate education. *Higher Education Research & Development, 21*(1). 5-21.

Herron, J. & Major, C. (2002). Creating and implementing an innovative academic program for community college leadership development. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education 50*(2). 14-25.

The remainder of references are available upon request.