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Case-based Learning: Educating Future Human Service Managers

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Using teaching cases in professional education programs has gained increased attention in the past several decades. While the use of teaching cases has been an important part of social work education, the majority of current casebooks focus on micro or direct practice issues and settings. Over the past forty years only four major casebooks have focused exclusively on the macro practice of social work. This analysis of case-based learning is divided into the following components: 1) the search for practice wisdom emerging from analyzing cases within the context of management knowledge and skills, 2) case discussion in the classroom, including student and instructor preparation, case selection and integration into the course, case debriefing, student-designed cases, and conceptual frameworks for teaching management, 3) a conclusion that identifies the benefits and limitations of case-based learning.

KEYWORDS Management education, case-based learning, debriefing frameworks

INTRODUCTION

Using teaching cases in professional education programs has gained increased attention in the past several decades. The use of teaching cases dates back to the early 1900s when the Harvard Law School began experimenting with cases

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(Jones, 2003). In a similar fashion, early social work education programs (pre-dating the university-based programs at the turn of the 20th century) used case-based learning. Today teaching cases are seen as a way to create a learner-centered educational environment for self-directed inquiry about different interventions related to multi-problem situations, models of practice, and/or new ways of conceptualizing practice (Cossom, 1991).

Case-based teaching and learning provides a problem-solving laboratory to identify multiple alternatives to diverse situations. Through discussion and dialogue, students learn new ways of looking at situations that challenge attitudes and mindsets while learning to make decisions based on the available information (Webster, 1998). Cossom identifies several skills that case-based teaching can promote: (1) learning how to make judgments based on facts and articulated values rather than only assumptions, (2) applying and adapting conceptual and theoretical knowledge to complex and chaotic real-life situations, (3) making decisions in the context of competing alternatives, (4) learning to deal with differences of opinion among colleagues, (5) making use of colleagues as potential resources, and (6) presenting one's ideas and analysis that calls on the skills of verbal communication, influence, and debate

The objective of graduate education for social workers is to equip students not only with essential knowledge but also with the ability to utilize that knowledge in their daily practice (Jones, 2003). Social workers need to be able to retrieve and apply their knowledge in a manner that is appropriate to the situations encountered. Learning through case-based teaching not only helps social work students to apply the knowledge required but does so within a context that they may encounter in the future. Cognitive psychologists have identified the importance of integrating new knowledge into existing knowledge while creating frameworks to organize, retain, retrieve, and use of information (Barrows, 1985). The case-based approach to learning draws upon the existing knowledge and experiences of the student while introducing new concepts, theories, and practices within a framework that can promote retention and retrieval.

This analysis of case-based learning is divided into the following components: 1) the search for practice wisdom emerging from analyzing cases, 2) case discussion in the classroom (including student and instructor preparation, case selection and integration into the course, case debriefing, student-designed cases, and conceptual frameworks for teaching management) and 3) conclusions related to the benefits and limitations of case-based learning.

SEARCH FOR PRACTICE WISDOM

One of the unique aspects of case-based learning is the opportunity to link real-life situations with the theories and practice principles identified in the

literature. Case-based learning also provides a venue for exploring the multiple aspects of practice wisdom, complementing what may emerge in the supervisory and mentoring processes of field instruction. The teaching case can become the common denominator across campus and fieldwork instruction for all students as they search for an understanding of practice wisdom. For the purposes of this analysis, the following definition of practice wisdom has been adapted from the definition of wisdom in the Oxford English Dictionary: “the capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct [practice] and soundness of judgment in the choice of means and ends. . . . having the ability to perceive and adopt the best means for accomplishing an end” (p. 3700). In essence, wisdom is a complex blending of knowledge, skills, and experience that seeks to combine action and reflection.

A study by Birren (1969) found that as executives matured over time, they increase their abilities to deal more abstractly with information in order to generate alternative, sometimes novel, solutions to problems. This maturation process can be enhanced, but not necessarily replaced, by the use of teaching cases. As Birren and Fisher (1990) note, wisdom is tested by circumstances in which we need to decide what is changeable and what is not. Wisdom brings together previously separated processes of logical knowing with uncertainty and reflection. It also relies on interpersonal exchanges in order to develop the ability to balance facts with questions about ambiguous situations while probing for truth and avoiding rigidity. Sometimes asking the “right question” can be more important than searching for the “right answer”. Birren and Fisher (1990) come to the conclusion that “a wise person has learned to balance the opposing valences of the three aspects of behavior: cognition, affect, and volition. A wise person weighs the known and unknown, resists overwhelming emotion while maintaining interest, and carefully chooses when and where to take action” (pp. 331–332). In a similar way, Taranto (1989) links wisdom to such personality traits as patience, understanding, acceptance, and a sense of humor along with considerable interpersonal skills. She notes that wise persons seem to be able to recognize their own limitations and the limitations of the context of the problems.

The search for practice wisdom is an important by-product of case-based learning. Klein and Bloom (1995) identified several important dimensions of practice wisdom. They define practice wisdom as a “system of personal and value-driven knowledge emerging out of the transaction between the phenomenological experience of the client (agency) situation and the use of scientific information (where) value-driven practice experience can be translated into communicable terms and scientific findings can be translated into practice principles” (pp. 801–802). They note that this system of knowledge includes a set of principles that incorporate the values of the worker and the profession and serves as rules to translate

empirical knowledge, prior experiences, and other forms of knowing into present professional actions.

Cases also provide a unique opportunity for students to reflect critically upon three aspects of practice: 1) the relevance of theory to practice, 2) the role of research for informing practice, and 3) the use of practitioner standards and guidelines for decision-making behaviors. Both students and practitioners may ask questions like: “How can my decisions use current theories?” “Does relevant research offer me alternative choices which may be more effective?” “How does research enhance and expand upon my practice wisdom in ways that give me increased confidence about decisions and actions?” In an analysis of a teaching case, these types of questions encourage students to further develop a mindset that values and uses research, theory, and experiential evidence to inform their decisions. Case discussions can also highlight the limitations or gaps in existing research and identify where additional research is needed.

Approaches to Case-based Learning by Other Professions

While the Harvard Law School pioneered the use of teaching cases in the context of the Socratic method, this approach differs widely from teaching with cases in other professions. The Socratic method “involves the asking of questions that inevitably lead the answerer to a logical conclusion, intended and foreseen by the professor or judge” (Aldisert, 1989 as cited in Lynn 1999). This single, right answer approach allows for dialogue about the logic that underlies how problems are defined and solved but reflects primarily a search for the correct logic that leads to the answer.

In contrast, the Harvard Business School began utilizing teaching cases in an entirely different way. Realizing that the Socratic method did not always apply to business issues and concepts, business schools used a more problem-driven, experience-based method of teaching because situations in corporations were complex and often required multiple solutions (Kimball, 1995). The business school approach featured student-centered group discussion where the instructor assumed a less didactic and more facilitative role. Business students needed to understand the array of issues emerging in a situation, rather than to pinpoint a single problem with only one viable option. Teaching cases were used “to help the student develop a way of understanding and addressing a corporation’s problems” (Christensen & Hansen, 1987 p. 27).

The medical profession took a different route by developing the problem-based learning (PBL) approach in order to address the shortcomings of traditional medical education that emphasized memorization of isolated bodies of knowledge (Lynn, 1999; Barrows, 1985). PBL sought to orient the learner by teaching students how to identify and apply relevant knowledge. PBL simulates “real life situations by providing students with deliberately ill-structured clinical problems before students have been given

the necessary information for solving them” (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003). The ill-structured problems lack sufficient information to understand the entire problem, often change as new information is learned, allow for multiple perspectives and ideas to interpret the situation, and have no absolute answer (Gallagher, Stepien, & Rosenthal, 1992). The ill-structured problems are messy and require considerable reflection to understand the situation prior to formulating alternatives. Rather than presenting students with cases that are simple and focus on one specific issue, the ill-structured case includes undefined problems, incomplete information, and unasked questions.

In contrast to the experiences of law, business, and medicine, the social work profession is built upon a predominantly case-based approach to practice (e.g. caseload, case worker, case manager, etc.) and uses teaching cases to educate future practitioners. Both the Council of Social Work Education and the Family Services Association of America have published case materials dealing with social welfare issues (Cossom, 1991). The traditional approach to case-based learning has emphasized specific learning theories, various practice interventions, and problems facing different client populations and problems.

The traditional approach in social work classrooms is for the instructor to discuss case scenarios and guide the students toward various alternatives and/or solutions. The cases often focus on a targeted intervention or practice method with an implied outcome (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003). While this approach may be effective in introducing a new intervention or practice method, it may reduce the potential for the student to become an active learner in the process. Given the limited amount of time in any particular class session, the learner may become overly focused on finding a solution, rather than on exploring multiple alternatives (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003). Social work education programs that utilize teaching cases often seek to combine the features of complexity found in business school cases with the problem-based learning approach of medical school cases (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003; Ferguson, 2005).

While PBL replicates the complexity of cases found in the workplace and promotes life-long and self-directed learning, the implementation of PBL in social work education is difficult. PBL was designed from a medical perspective where “problems” are identified and addressed in the context of brief episodes of service. This approach differs somewhat from the long-term strengths-based practice found in many social service settings where client engagement and consultation are critical elements of intervention (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003). However, PBL does encourage students to question, research, and critically assess a situation where no solution is implied or preconceived. Drawing from the strengths of both the traditional case teaching and the PBL, the next section explores the use of case-based teaching and learning in the area of social work management practice.

Use of Teaching Cases in the Social Work Management Education

While the use of teaching cases has been popular in social work education, the majority of casebooks focus on micro or direct practice issues and settings. Over the past forty years only four major casebooks exclusively address social work management practice, even though several casebooks were published in the 1920s (Betten & Austin, 1990). The first macro casebook, *A Casebook in Social Work Administration*, was published by the Council of Social Work Education (Schatz, 1970) in response to the launching of management practice MSW specializations. The majority of cases in this casebook include a short history of a situation, the problem to be addressed, and the solutions employed in the situation. The brief cases are illustrative rather than comprehensive and include solutions laid out for the students. Discussion and debate around the effectiveness of the solutions was intended to give students a chance to connect theory with practice. However, there are minimal opportunities for students to develop analytical skills when both problems and solutions have been identified.

The second casebook, *Casebook of Management for Nonprofit Organizations* (Young, 1985) includes both problems and solutions in sections related to risks and constraints, outcomes, and analysis. The cases provide a large amount of information for students to discuss and debate but give little attention to the analytic thinking required for developing decision-making skills.

The third casebook, *Dilemmas in Human Services Management* (Mayer, 1994) presents a managerial leadership model, along with cases reflecting planning and evaluation. It focuses on the facts of the case, issues, alternative actions, recommendations, and self reflection and discussion questions. The brief cases range in topics from affirmative action to volunteer/staff relations with little explicit connection to the managerial leadership model.

The fourth casebook, *Cases in Macro Social Work Practice* (Fauri, Wernet, & Netting, 2000), is organized around the major domains of macro practice (e.g. community practice, management practice and policy practice). The cases are introduced with a description of relevant theory, concepts, or practice perspectives in order to illustrate the potential for applying particular theories or concepts. Through the use of case discussion questions that seek to apply concepts to the development of solutions, the learner is expected to determine how theory informs practice (a challenge for even the most experienced practitioner).

While all four casebooks focus on case presentation, little attention is given to the nature of case discussion that follows reading of a case. In the next section, more attention is given to how cases can be analyzed and discussed.

CASE DISCUSSION IN THE CLASSROOM

Case-based teaching requires a different approach to the teaching and learning process, especially modified classroom environments that support small group discussions (Cossom, 1991). Since there is no one correct teaching method for utilizing cases, instructors need to find an approach that builds upon their philosophy of teaching and assists them in reaching their course objectives. The following elements of case-based teaching are helpful to take into account: student preparation, instructor preparation, type of case, case selection, and the location of cases in the course schedule.

Student Preparation

Students often enter the classroom with a preconceived idea of how to engage in the process of learning (Wasserman, 1994; Lynn, 1999). Many have developed expectations regarding their role in the classroom, the role of the instructor, and the method for gaining knowledge. Some students are accustomed to the traditional lecture-based model and often search for ways to learn the “right” answers. Others enter the classroom with prior work experience and an ability to connect their experience to their learning. Despite the student’s orientation to learning, the process of case-based teaching needs to be explained in the classroom and can use the following guidelines developed by Wasserman (1994) and Lynn (1999): 1) describe how case-based learning differs from lecture-based teaching as well as the benefits of the case method and how they address the overall learning goals, 2) identify the challenges that case-based learning might present, 3) describe the experiential approach of “examination” associated with case analysis and interactive case-based learning, 4) explain that class participation is the primary criterion for evaluating student performance in base-based learning, 5) note that some students need time to make the transition to case-based learning (instructor patience in dealing with potential resistance may be needed), and 6) when introducing case-based learning, describe the process of reading the case and discussion questions using the critical thinking perspective noted in the discussion of Table 7.

All these expectations for active involvement differ from the traditional passive approach to lecture-based learning.

Instructor Preparation

The use of case-based teaching is not only a shift for students, but also a substantial shift in the role of the instructor (Cossman, 1991). The instructor no longer plays the role of the expert in charge of the classroom but rather of a facilitator seeking to promote discussion and identifying linkages to concepts and principles. The instructor sets the intellectual tone of inquiry and serves as

the stimulator of new ideas as well as the one who encourages visionary or alternative thinking (Webster, 1988). The following instructional practices can help create a learning environment in the classroom (Cossman, 1991): a) encourage student input as well as questioning and challenging students, b) ask open-ended questions to stimulate discussion, c) ask for clarification, d) discourage quick-fix solutions, e) assist in integrating case examples with theory and concepts, f) and model active questioning and listening.

The type of teaching case needs to provide students with an opportunity to explore issues, dialogue with one another, debate potential issues and solutions, and see the link between the content of the cases and the course objectives. The length of the teaching case varies considerably, from one-issue in a brief case to longer, more complex cases. The amount of information included in each case affects the amount of problem-solving required of students (Freeman-Herreid, 2005). Lynn (1999) identified five types of teaching cases: 1) decision-forcing cases, 2) policymaking cases, 3) problem-defining cases, 4) concept-application cases, and 5) illustrative cases. The *decision-forcing cases* are designed to help students make decisions under pressure with limited information and no clear solution. By creating a high-pressure decision situation, students gain awareness of the emotional, intellectual, and procedural complexities of decision-making. *Policy-making cases* introduce a variety of options related to a complex situation in order to encourage students to consider larger issues as well as larger frameworks for future action (rather than taking immediate action). *Problem-defining cases* assist students in problem identification and option development that also require analysis, research, and evaluation. The *concept-application case* reflects a specific theory or concept that has been or will be presented in a lecture or discussion. The *illustrative case* identifies a situation and solution for students to analyze and debate the outcomes and other potential solutions.

The selection of a case involves its appropriateness for the students, its relationship to the overall goals of the course, and the degree to which it might capture student interest and attention. Students approach each case differently and may find the case easy or difficult. The amount of information needed for inclusion in a case varies greatly depending on the audience and learning objectives (Freeman-Herreid, 2005). Some students find it difficult to analyze and discuss cases that have too much extraneous or contradictory information and therefore learn more effectively with cases that are simple and easy to analyze. Other students display a higher level of critical thinking skills in extracting the essential information and a capacity to handle the ambiguity found in more complex cases.

Incorporating Cases into Course Design

There are at least three ways to incorporate a case into class discussion. One is to use the case to sensitize the students to the issues related to a particular

topic, like supervision (Austin & Hopkins, 2004), *before* introducing major concepts from the readings. Another approach is to use the case *after* a brief lecture in order to provide an opportunity to apply concepts. In addition to this pre-post approach, a more experiential approach to case-based learning involves the use of debate.

The “case debate” is a variation on the traditional approach to oral presentations or large group discussion. The case debate can provide an engaging way for students to experience a case, strengthen their analytical skills, and assist in learning how to deliver compelling arguments. Based on the business school experience of case debates (Stewart & Winn, 1996), the in-class case debate involves multiple student-led teams that analyze the case and then: 1) present their analysis and proposed solutions to the entire class, 2) assess the presentations of the other teams, 3) deliver a rebuttal that focuses on the strengths of its own position and the weaknesses of other groups presentations, and 4) answer questions presented by other classmates and the instructor. The debate process provides a competitive environment that can energize students and motivate them to develop a more in-depth analysis of the case. The challenge of presenting your own views and debating the weaknesses of others can help students to actively engage in thinking, questioning, and advocating their positions. In addition to the case analysis, students are also encouraged to expand their presentation skills, teamwork skills, and resource utilization skills within their teams.

Cases can also be used to test the knowledge and skills of students. The case becomes an element in an examination whereby the instructor poses a series of questions for students to answer once they have reviewed the case. This form of learning is more summative than formative in that it uses the case to test the student’s capacity to integrate learning from multiple sources inside and outside of the course (Packard & Austin, 2007).

Case-based learning is merely experiential learning if it is not placed within a framework of knowledge and skills. Three conceptual frameworks of management practice are used in this analysis to illustrate the importance of framing the process of case-based learning. The frameworks complement each other in the sense that each offers different perspectives. The framework of managerial roles describes the different roles that human service managers assume in their daily practice (Menefee, 2000). The competing values framework (Edwards & Yankey, 2006; Quinn, 1988) captures the tensions created by competing priorities that affect managerial decision-making. The management functions framework focuses on the organizational processes that are needed to achieve organizational effectiveness and excellence (Kettner, 2002; Lewis, Packard, & Lewis, 2007). The elements of these frameworks are aligned in Table 1 to reflect the three major domains as follows:

- Leadership roles and functions that focus on the external “big picture” perspectives and the internal aspects of human service organizations

TABLE 1 Conceptual Frameworks

	Leadership Processes	Analytic Processes	Interactional Processes
Managerial Roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundary Spanner • Innovator • Organizer • Team leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource administrator • Evaluator • Policy practitioner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicator • Advocate • Supervisor • Facilitator
Competing Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative/risk- taking (external) • Directive & goal-oriented (internal) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stability and control (monitoring and coordinating) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive & flexible (facilitating and mentoring)
Managerial Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive-board relations (governance) • Environmental relations & strategy • Organizational design & structure • Leadership, vision, values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program planning & design • Program evaluation • Information management • Financial management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human resource management • Supervisory management • Organization development • Change management

- Analytic roles and functions that focus on assessing and managing resources and technical processes
- Interactional roles and functions that emphasize the human dimension of organizational life

These three major domains are vertically aligned to connect the elements of each of the three conceptual frameworks that are horizontally displayed. The three conceptual frameworks can provide a map for students to frame and integrate case-based learning. Different situations in organizational life call upon different roles and functions. Over time managers acquire the practice wisdom to recognize the management roles required and the related functions that need to be performed. The role perspective is especially useful in determining the specific managerial behaviors that are needed. The systems perspective underlying the management functions is very useful for locating and assessing specific problem areas. The competing values framework provides a context for recognizing the need for balance and tradeoffs in the process of planning, managing and evaluation.

Case Debriefing

Beyond the content-specific questions found at the end of cases, instructors also have an opportunity to teach students by utilizing different case debriefing strategies. Case debriefing is often a neglected aspect of case-based learning and teaching. Several case debriefing strategies are identified

and illustrated in Tables 2 through 6. The first one on *managerial problem-solving* views the case in the context of a manager needing to address an issue as if it arrived in her/his mail (email or snail) or emerged in the context of a staff meeting. Most managerial problem-solving strategies are a variation on the components noted in Table 2. The student or group of students move through steps that flow in a cycle where the response to each step leads to the next until returning to the first step on problem identification. Each instructor may approach managerial problem-solving in a different way but these six steps reflect the components of most problem-solving frameworks

TABLE 2 A Managerial Problem-solving Strategy

Step 1:	<u>Problem Identification</u> in which the manager is encouraged to gather multiple perceptions of others (staff) with regard to how to define or frame the problem
Step 2:	<u>Identify the Underlying Assumptions</u> that are often buried in the problem definition (e.g. there's no support or funding to address this issue, it would take too long to address this problem, no one really cares to resolve the problem, we would never get the director's support for a change, etc.) as well as the implicit or explicit values that operate within the agency's culture (e.g. client services are our top priority, staff feedback is expected and valued, etc.)
Step 3:	<u>Structuring the Involvement of Key Stakeholders</u> to gather their perceptions of the problem and their motivations to address the problem
Step 4:	<u>Developing Three Viable Options</u> to address the problem by identifying the pros and cons of each option
Step 5:	<u>Selecting One of the Three Options</u> and developing an action plan for implementing the option over time (e.g. who should be involved, what resources are needed, what is a realistic time frame, etc.)
Step 6:	<u>Monitoring and Evaluating</u> the option selected in terms of specifying the criteria by which the solution selected could be evaluated three to six months from the launch of the implementation process where the goal is to identify what is working and what is not in order to start the problem identification process all over again.

TABLE 3 The Practice Wisdom Inherent in the Analytic and Interactional Dimensions of Case Analysis*

I. Analytic Dimensions	
a.	How does the problem/situation impact the organization?
b.	How can key stakeholders embrace/grasp the complexity of the problem?
c.	What is the best way to assess the trade-offs in exploring alternative approaches?
d.	How can participants distinguish between decisions that must be made expeditiously and those that require "going with the flow of events" (muddle through)?
e.	How can participants plan ahead to deal with the problem but be open to change along the way?
<hr/>	
II. Interactional Dimensions	
a.	What is the best way to capture/consider the perspectives of different stakeholders?
b.	How can participants be open and honest with others in the organizations as well as with themselves?
c.	How would participants determine that the decision(s) reached were based on fair play?
d.	How would participants aggressively pursue the true nature of the problem/situation?
e.	How would participants determine if the key players cared enough to make tough decisions?

* Adapted from Brody (2005).

TABLE 4 Strategic Management for Case Analysis

-
1. **Key Issues** –Assess the organizational and administrative situation with supportive data. Include a list and description of key issues and problems. Also note organizational strengths and how these may be relevant to the issues. Discuss *the top 3–4 issues*, including why they need attention and the effects they are having on the organization. Use relevant theories, administrative principles, and research to support and elaborate upon your analysis.
 2. **Major Goals** – List *immediate and long-term goals* for a change plan, in priority order, with rationales for each goal. Relate these to the top identified issues and problems listed above.
 3. **The Plan** – Describe your *intervention/change plan* for the accomplishment of each change goal. Describe specific strategies, techniques, or activities to be used. Include your rationales for each, and how the activities will be evaluated. Use relevant theories, administrative principles, and research to support your plan.
 4. **Evaluation** –Describe how you would *evaluate the outcomes of your intervention* using any relevant program evaluation or other research methods. Be specific about the design and process for each element. These should relate to the above assessment, goals, and intervention plan.
-

TABLE 5 Help-seeking Behaviors Related to Analyzing Teaching Cases

-
- Step 1: What aspect of the problem(s) presented in the teaching case is most perplexing to you?
-
- Step 2: Which actions taken in the case are least familiar to you (not sure how you would actually carry out to actions)?
-
- Step 3: What type of advice/consultation would be most helpful to you?
- Can you identify the areas in this case where you feel least confident or where you lack sufficient experience?
 - Do you need additional information and where might you find it?
 - Which aspects of the case represent areas where consultation with others might improve your understanding of this case?
 - What kind of feedback would be most useful to you in terms of the ways in which you analyzed this case?
-
- Step 4: With whom might you consult to explore different ways of approaching the situations in this case?
- How might follow-up consultation address your concerns about this case?
 - What type of mentoring or coaching would you find most useful in terms of expanding your own managerial skill set related to the issues in this case?
-

A debriefing strategy that features the *analytic and interactional aspects of case analysis* emerges from the work of Brody (2005). He introduces the ethical dimension of decision-making that is a central feature of how staff members interact with each other to address problems. An illustration of these interactional as well as the analytic dimensions is located in Table 3.

The debriefing framework related to *strategic management* draws upon organizational concepts and managerial principles. Strategic management is defined within the context of case-based learning as a process of identifying strategic issues in a case and developing a plan for addressing them. Each of

TABLE 6 Policy-oriented Case Analysis**Step 1: Assessing Problems and Risks*

- What are the most important components of the situation (prioritize)?
- What factors led to the situation?
- What are the risks to the organization and those associated with the actions of others?

Step 2: Assessing Impact on Organizational Mission and Legacy

- How might the organization's mission be affected by the problem/situation?
- How does the organization's external environment impact/influence the problem?
- How might this situation affect the organization's future/legacy?

Step 3: Identifying External and Internal Actors

- Who can help address the problem and who might interfere?
- What might be the motives and interests of both sets of actors and how might they be addressed?
- What kind of power or influence is held by each set of actors and how might it be exercised?

Step 4: Identifying Opportunities and Constraints

- What might be potential improvements in organizational processes?
- What are the opportunities to build working relationships with internal and external stakeholders?

Step 5: Identifying Outcomes and Related Strategies

- What are some of the key aspects of successful outcomes?
- How do the outcomes move the organization toward the organization's mission?
- How might opposition to the outcomes destabilize the organization?
- How might the outcomes strengthen the organization's capacity in the future?
- How do the outcomes make use of available tools, address current organizational constraints, and make use of available time for implementation?
- What strategies are needed to implement the outcomes (a plan with prioritized actions steps, a timeframe, and an assessment of needed resources and support)

Step 6: Identifying the Manager's Short-term and Long-term Objectives

- What are the short-term objectives to successfully address the problem and set the stage for long-term objectives?
- What are the long-term objectives and how might the current situation affect future success/accomplishments/goals?

* Adapted from *Moretools: A Framework for Analyzing Management Dilemmas* (Brock, 2004).

the following steps is described in Table 4: 1) issue identification (a condition that needs attention), 2) goal setting (specifying change goals in the form of outcomes), 3) intervention planning (goal-related change activities), and 4) evaluating the intervention plan (gathering data and reflecting upon outcomes). The conceptual foundation for each of these steps is described in more detail in Packard & Austin (2007).

A debriefing strategy that features the process of *executive coaching* can provide students with yet another way to discuss a case (Bloom, Catagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005). This approach is based on the capacity to develop help-seeking behaviors where the seeking of consultation, supervision, or

TABLE 7 Major Skill Sets in the Critical Thinking Process*

I.	Clarifying – What is being stated?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify problems • Clarify issues, conclusion, or beliefs • Identify unstated assumptions • Clarify and analyze the meanings of words and phrases • Clarify values and standards
<hr/>	
II.	Analyzing – What does it mean?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify significant similarities and differences • Recognize contradictions and inconsistencies • Analyze/evaluate arguments, interpretations, beliefs, or theories • Distinguish relevant from irrelevant questions, data, claims, or reasons • Detect bias • Evaluate the accuracy of different sources of information (“evidence”) • Use sound criteria for evaluation • Compare perspectives, interpretations, or theories • Evaluate perspectives, interpretations, or theories
<hr/>	
III.	Applying – How can it be applied?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare with analogous situations; transfer insights to new contexts • Make well-reasoned inferences and predictions • Refine generalizations and avoid oversimplifications • Compare and contrast ideas with actual practice • Raise and pursue root or significant questions • Make interdisciplinary connections • Analyze or evaluate policies or actions
<hr/>	
IV.	Owning – How do the results of critical thinking apply to my situation?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate one’s own reasoning process • Explore thoughts underlying feelings and feelings underlying thoughts • Design and carry out critical tests of concepts, theories, and hypotheses • Discover and accurately evaluate the implications and consequences of a proposed action

*Abstracted from “Examples of Critical Thinking Skills” (p. 129), Gibbs & Gambrill (1999).

mentoring involves questions that are more reflective in nature. Developing an insight into one’s own cognitive and affective domains is as important for managerial practice as it is for effective clinical practice. It involves moving past the profound ambivalence about seeking help from others as reflected in: 1) appearing ignorant or incompetent, 2) feeling that one might be unclear about the advice being sought, 3) being unsure of how to gather and utilize alternative perspectives, 4) fearing that more advice will simply add confusion, and/or 5) worrying that asking for advice takes too much time. There are probably many other reasons for not seeking help. Table 5 illustrates an array of questions that can be used to debrief a case from the perspective of seeking advice or consultation.

The fifth and final debriefing strategy relates to the *policy practice* dimension of administration where managers seek to address the interpretation of a public or administrative policy in order to manage the policy implementation process. As Brock (2003) notes in his case analysis approach

to public policy cases, the focus is on the impact of new policies on organizational missions. His key components include opportunities and constraints as well as short-term and long-term objectives as reflected in an adaptation of his framework in Table 6.

Teaching with Student-Designed Cases

Another dimension of student learning involves the development of the cases themselves while students reflect back on their organizational experiences in order to describe a problematic situation (e.g. difficult supervisor, problematic peer relations, problems in dealing with upper management, or tensions in dealing with other organizations). In order to help students develop a case, the following questions can serve as a guideline: 1) Where did the situation occur? 2) When did it arise (once, repeatedly)? c) Who was involved? d) What actually occurred? e) Why do you think it occurred? and f) How did it affect you and others? The goal is to develop a brief vignette (three to five pages) that describes the situation and problem but does not include solutions or outcomes. The open-ended nature of the case provides others with the opportunity to use their critical thinking skills as illustrated in Table 7 (Gibbs & Gambrill, 1999).

Developing teaching and training cases requires an understanding of the instructional process. As Barbazette (2004) notes, case vignettes and longer case studies are often written for one of the following reasons: 1) to identify the positive and/or negative aspects of a situation and to encourage the learner to use the case to reflect on her/his own experiences, 2) to provide opportunities to systematically use all or part of a problem-solving strategy, 3) to practice using skills or exploring ideas and attitudes in a safe learning context, 4) to summarize a learning experience in order to apply new ideas and skills, especially the transfer of learning to the workplace, and 5) to experience a comprehensive case over a period of time (e.g. course or workshop) where different aspects of the case are featured. The first three reasons relate primarily to students or participants when developing their own cases and the last two reasons involve the instructor or trainer who focuses on the instructional objectives of case-based learning.

Depending on the reason for developing a case, students and instructors assume different roles. The role of students is to: 1) define the situation (e.g. describing the problem(s), searching for lessons learned, exploring highly-charged attitudes, etc.), 2) select the setting (e.g. type of organization, reporting relationships, union or non-union, etc.) and 3) select the main characters (e.g. job titles, education/experience, demographic characteristics related to gender, race, age). Some students are comfortable adding dialogue and all students are urged to disguise the names of the staff and organization to maintain confidentiality. In contrast, the role of

instructors includes: 1) developing the learning objectives inherent in the case, 2) designing the discussion questions to help increase learner understanding, especially in the case of brief cases, 3) selecting a debriefing strategy relevant to the case as well as the instructional objectives for the course, and 4) soliciting student feedback regarding specific case-based learning, especially from more than one student group (i.e. some years the students like the case while other years they do not).

Since instructors usually lead the case debriefing session, the following discussion questions can be used when the class is divided into small groups for case analysis and then brought back together for case-specific discussion: 1) what was the nature and outcome of the small group discussion? 2) what are some individual reactions to the case? 3) what concepts from course readings are relevant to this case analysis? and 4) what lessons can be identified from this case analysis and how might they be applied in an agency setting? More generic case discussion questions include: 1) what is your reaction to the case analysis process (easy, difficult, surprises, most meaningful part, etc.)? 2) can you identify any new learning for yourself (from the case itself, from the case discussion, from comparing the case with other cases, etc.)? and 3) how might the learning from this case be applied to your own learning agenda (relevance to one's own experience, possibility of different outcomes in different organizational settings, major lessons learned)?

While there may be disadvantages associated with student-developed cases in terms of their limited experience or capacity to fully develop the situation and the characters, they tend to be current and meaningful for the learners at their stage of professional development. Clearly, more comprehensive case development resides with the instructor. However, the following problems are associated with instructor-developed cases:

- many universities do not recognize faculty-developed cases as publications that merit the same value as journal articles or books;
- there are very few publication outlets for publishing cases;
- faculty members have limited time to develop comprehensive cases, and in some situations, have been removed from practice for some time and therefore unable to capture current or credible situations.

BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF CASE-BASED LEARNING

In using case-based learning, both instructors and students can select roles and functions that seem most relevant to a case, discuss their shared or divergent perceptions, and identify principles that can be used in practice. Instructors can choose cases for classroom activities based on specific learning objectives and the specific questions at the end of each case. The instructor and students can also select one or more debriefing frameworks.

Finally, cases may also be used as part of an examination for a course or as an end-of-program comprehensive examination to assess the capacities of students to integrate knowledge and skills by applying their analytic abilities to a case situation.

There are multiple benefits that can be derived from the use of teaching cases in preparing future human service managers. We conclude with some of the benefits of case-based learning followed by some of the limitations.

Simulating Administrative Dilemmas

The use of cases can respond to the interests of students who want to experience different aspects of agency administration in order to test their understanding and refine their skills in situations that simulate actual practice. Many students enter graduate human service administration courses with limited managerial experiences (including negative stereotypes of administrators whom they have observed). Cases provide students with opportunities to think like administrators and a classroom venue to integrate theory and practice principles.

Leveling the Learning Field

Since students enter graduate management programs with different organizational experiences, case-based discussions serve to “level the learning field” by giving students an equal opportunity to contribute to a case discussion. Any student can make observations about what is happening in a case, analyze a situation using theory and practice principles, and recommend courses of action.

Analyzing Organizational Challenges

Case-based learning can orient students to multiple organizational challenges by helping them develop mental models (analytic and interactional) linked to the values of client-centered administration (Rapp & Poertner, 1992). Learning in this context can actually enhance student ideas about risk-taking, especially within the safety of the classroom environment. A large part of effective management is the framing of probing questions and weighing alternatives before acting. This process is not always possible to learn in agency internships but clearly available in case-based learning. Case discussions allow time for all phases: assessment, planning, and action. In addition, case-based learning also provides repeated learning opportunities to use different analytical frameworks to respond to complex practice situations. Just as experienced administrators develop their own “theories in use” (Argyris & Schon, 1996) to guide their thinking and daily decision

making, case discussions can help students identify and articulate their own mental models related to their operating assumptions and alternative approaches to decision-making.

Supplement to Fieldwork

Case-based learning can be an important supplement to fieldwork. Given the constraints of agency-based fieldwork (e.g. limited time to debrief, reflect, assess, and integrate theory and practice), the use of teaching cases allows for more time to reflect and consider a broader array of administrative dilemmas than is found in most field experiences. Case discussion also allows for more guided risk-taking and provides access to organizational dilemmas that are not often accessible in fieldwork (e.g. staff supervision or executive-board relations).

Limitations

The benefits of case-based learning need to be balanced with the limitations inherent in an over-reliance on case-based learning for developing managerial competence and confidence. The major limitation of the case method is that classroom participants can only speculate about how they might act in a given situation. As a result, it is important to place case-based learning within a context of multiple learning opportunities; namely, lectures (“for conceptual inputs”), cases (“to widen exposure”), action learning internships (“for new experiences”) and self-reflection to capture the student’s own experiences and to make effective use of all of these experiences (Mintzberg, 2004). Another limitation relates to the lack of research on case-based learning. While it is not always clear to see how students organize the knowledge that they acquire (e.g. by course, topic, theory, or fieldwork experience), further research is needed to determine if recall related to analyzing cases provides students with a different organizing framework than traditional course work when they transfer learning from an educational program to full-time practice.

CONCLUSION

This journey through the land of case-based learning highlights an array of issues that involve both students and instructors. It begins with a recognition that case-based learning is one approach to enhancing the critical thinking skills of students and expanding their understanding of the principles that underlie practice wisdom. While there are different approaches to case-based learning in other professions, it is also important to note the long tradition of case-based learning and teaching in social work education.

This analysis of case-based learning focuses on the classroom and the issues involving student and instructor preparation, the different types of cases, and how cases are selected and incorporated into the design of courses using several conceptual frameworks on management knowledge and skills. Special attention is given to the process of managerial decision-making and the use of critical thinking skills as reflected in the following debriefing frameworks: 1) managerial problem-solving; 2) analytic and interactional aspects of ethical decision-making; 3) help-seeking behaviors related to consultation; 4) strategic management; and 5) policy-analytic decision-making. This analysis concludes with a brief description of how students can develop their own cases and a discussion of the benefits and limitations of case-based learning.

Case-based learning provides an opportunity for students and instructors to learn and grow together. Given the long tradition of case-based learning in social work education, more effort needs to be given to providing students with experiential opportunities to learn about management as a complement to field-based learning (Austin, Brody, & Packard, 2009).

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