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Using Cases about Teaching for Faculty Development

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Stories about dilemmas faced by learners and teachers can serve as the focal point for faculty development workshops, stimulating faculty members, in an engaging and powerful way, to reflect on their work with students. The authors offer suggestions for constructing or acquiring cases and describe strategies for formatting and facilitating case discussion workshops.

As faculty developers, we often find ourselves in classrooms watching complex, fascinating stories about teaching and learning unfold. Many years ago, Roland Christensen of the Harvard Business School found that by capturing and retelling these stories on paper (Christensen & Hansen, 1987), he could stimulate both beginning and experienced faculty members to develop new insights into their teaching of business administration. What we have learned from him is that by turning our own classroom observations and the experiences of faculty with whom we work into grist for discussion in faculty development workshops, we can offer teachers in varied disciplines and settings an engaging and powerful way to reflect on their work with students. Case-based workshops are appropriate for many different learning goals. They can be used to introduce new educational concepts, provoke attitude change, provide practice in solving classroom problems, and stimulate the desire to acquire new skills.

Teaching cases convey concrete classroom situations intended to invoke diverse responses. For example, a case available from the Harvard Business School describes the dilemma of a young graduate student who is confronted

by a student in class while teaching a small discussion section in a 90-student Shakespeare course. Rather than give his assigned report, the student criticizes the instructor's classroom approach and challenges her authority to control class discussion. She finds herself standing at the board facing what she perceives to be a hostile student who has not prepared for discussion and wondering how to handle this disruption and get back to the content of the course, the overthrow of Richard the III.

As a faculty development exercise, the discussion of a teaching case has several positive features. First, cases encourage the exploration of the process of teaching in context, rather than as a set of de-contextualized skills. In the discussion of teaching cases, faculty members explore the interactions of teachers, students, and content in a specific setting, and consider how these factors combine to foster or diminish learning. A richly detailed case stimulates minute-by-minute analysis of a teaching and learning encounter while engaging participants empathically in the dilemma faced by the teacher or students. The discussion simulates the experience of reflecting-in-action, an important feature of professional behavior defined by Donald Schön (1987) as the ability to act, analyze that action, note any unexpected consequences, and experiment with other actions without missing a beat. Workshops in which teaching cases are discussed can be helpful in promoting increased awareness of the multiple features of a teaching situation and in developing skills in reflection-in-action.

Second, in discussing a teaching case with colleagues, faculty members are exposed to multiple perspectives and interpretations. A participant is often surprised to find that his or her analysis of the situation or recommendation for action is not widely shared. Assertions about learning and the role of the teacher, about classroom control and content authority, about student needs and motivations are frequently challenged—and sometimes changed. In the process of discussing the case, a faculty member may realize the need to re-examine assumptions, attitudes, and actions that have characterized his or her teaching in the past.

Third, in seeking to resolve the educational dilemmas presented in a case and in finding preconceptions dislodged, faculty members may be stimulated to learn more about the conceptual structures and tactical issues of teaching. Case discussion may increase faculty members' interest in improving their own teaching. The discussion of a teaching case can be followed by additional opportunities for teaching improvement such as skill-building exercises, brief lectures on educational concepts and strategies, resources for personal study, observations of other teachers, or further discussion with colleagues.

Finally, by formatting a faculty development workshop around a case and its discussion, we can model an active approach to learning and demonstrate the skills needed for case-based instruction and learner involvement. A case-based workshop follows the experiential learning cycle described by Kolb (1984). Participants move from the concrete experience presented in the case through reflective discussion to the generation of conceptual understanding and experimentation with new applications. In short, participation in the discussion of a teaching case mirrors the active learning that we encourage faculty members to design into their own courses.

Creating and Collecting Cases

Teaching cases grow out of situations that present teachers with fundamental and complex questions, ones that have no obvious or definitive answers and that invoke broad themes of content treatment, teacher-student relationship, and classroom behavior. A good case is engaging. It involves the faculty member in a specific dilemma and prompts intense reflection on issues underlying the event. Cases can range from concise vignettes to elaborate narratives with extensive supporting documentation. However long it is, a case needs to contain enough detail to support varied interpretations and to keep the analysis and recommendations grounded in particulars. For faculty development workshops, with their limited call on participants' time, short cases of one to five pages are most manageable.

Like other stories, a case has a plot, an animating conflict between people, perspectives, purposes, and values that call for action by a main character. It offers one or more internal perspectives with which participants can identify and from which they can view the critical features of the situation in addition to seeing them in light of their own professional and personal background. Experiencing the situation from the viewpoint, and through the senses, of the teacher and students involved is basic to productive case discussion. Typically, cases include at least broad strokes of characterization; often, they contain actual dialogue as well. A telling detail often serves as the linchpin of an engaging discussion.

Stories that might be transformed into faculty development cases abound in colleges and universities. Kleinfeld (1990) suggests several questions for testing whether a story's central problem will make good grist for case discussion:

- Does it lack a single right answer or an obvious solution?
- Does it have multiple dimensions, e.g. pedagogical, interpersonal, ethical?
- Can it be analyzed through different frames of reference?

- Would faculty identify or empathize with the teacher?
- Is it engaging on an emotional as well as an intellectual level?
- Does it exemplify a fundamental problem that confronts many teachers?

If the story seems promising by these criteria, it is worth trying one's hand at turning it into a case. Doing so may simply mean writing up one's own observation. A more elaborate treatment, or a second-hand story, may require interviewing one or more of those involved in the situation. A straightforward narrative judiciously embellished with brief quotations and key details usually works best.

With video technology becoming ever more common, case writers are experimenting with other means of storytelling. For example, the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University has developed a series of trigger tapes to stimulate discussion about diversity in the classroom. In fact, though the written text is the traditional case form, any means of conveying the situation, from oral delivery with its ancient roots in storytelling to the most advanced interactive computer program, can serve the purpose. It is the fact of its being a story that defines a case rather than its format. Thus, anyone who can observe classes and talk with faculty members has the opportunity to create teaching cases.

For those who prefer to try using cases for faculty development before investing effort in creating them, teaching cases are available from various sources. The largest inventory has been developed by Christensen and his associates at the Harvard Business School (1987). Their cases and teaching notes are distributed by the School's Publishing Division, both singly and in book form. A few similar cases can be ordered from the Case Program at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Rita Silverman and William Welty of the Center for Case Studies in Teacher Education at Pace University have begun to develop a series of case studies for use in preservice and inservice teacher education. A few additional cases with discussion of their uses have been included in this volume. Currently Pat Hutchings, director of the American Association for Higher Education's Teaching Initiative, is conducting a project to develop cases about college teaching and learning. Interest in using cases for teacher education, faculty development, and higher education in general has been burgeoning in the last several years, and new cases should become increasingly available.

Setting Up Case-Based Workshops

Two discussion formats are particularly useful for case-based workshops: case method discussion and problem-based learning. In both of these

formats, a case or story provides the stimulus for discussants to acquire new concepts and develop skills in using those concepts to analyze and solve meaningful problems. In case-based workshops, the case is more than an illustration of a concept or skill. The case serves as a vehicle for stimulating new learning and is selected for the issues that it might provoke participants to explore both on their own and through discussion with peers. *The case serves to initiate and organize the learning process.*

Case-based workshops have the advantage of involving everyone in interactive problem solving. Discussion is learner-directed rather than teacher-directed, and most faculty members find it difficult to remain uninvolved as the teaching dilemma unfolds.

Both case discussion formats have logistical implications. In the case-method format developed by the Harvard Business School (Christensen & Hansen, 1987), participants prepare individually for a large-group discussion of the educational dilemmas and possible solutions. This type of case discussion is most effective when participants have read and analyzed the case prior to the workshop. When such advanced preparation is not possible, time can be allotted during the workshop for individual reading and analysis.

The facilitator usually begins a case-method discussion by asking two participants who might advocate very different views of the case to provide an initial analysis of the teaching problems. The lead-off discussants are given a few minutes to collect their thoughts while the facilitator reiterates the goals of the workshop or suggests relationships between this workshop and other faculty development opportunities. This opening gambit usually produces a plethora of hands, and the discussion is underway. An hour is generally sufficient for the discussion itself, but it can expand to fill whatever time is available. The workshop facilitator then stops the discussion of the case itself and invites participants to reflect on the teaching skills he or she has used. The final ten minutes of such a workshop might include a synthesis by the facilitator of the lessons learned (a) from the case and (b) about leading case-method discussions.

In a problem-based learning format (Wilkerson & Feletti, 1989) learners encounter a case "cold," without preparation, and work in small groups, with or without a facilitator present, to develop and test hypotheses about the nature of the teaching dilemma and possible solutions. Additional details of the case are disclosed as the discussion advances. The length of the case and the goals of the workshop determine the most appropriate timing for each section of the case. Because the case has not been studied in advance of the workshop, participants must draw heavily on previous knowledge and experience. When these are insufficient to explain the phenomena at hand or to

produce an acceptable solution, participants are encouraged to set individual or group learning goals for independent study.

The small groups come together during the final portion of the workshop to compare results and reflect on the process of facilitating problem-based discussions. Because the case is intended to stimulate a desire to know more about teaching and learning, it is most effectively utilized when two or more workshop sessions are scheduled with time in between for self-study. When such scheduling is not feasible, the facilitator may choose to elaborate on teaching issues raised during the discussion.

The choice of format will dictate the type of space required. Large group case-method sessions work best when participants can directly engage one another in face-to-face discussion. Lecture halls with fixed seating tend to encourage more limited discussion between the facilitator and one participant. Large boards or several flip charts are essential for recording the progress of discussion. In problem-based learning, space is necessary for several groups of 6 to 8 participants to work concurrently. Each group needs a chart or board to record group decisions and questions for further study.

Case-based workshops require that faculty participants talk to one another. Name-tags written for view across the room or large place cards facilitate discussion among participants as does the use of an introductory exercise in which participants have a chance to meet one another.

Facilitating Case Discussions

Facilitating the discussion of cases in either a large group or a small group requires a skillful balance of guiding and following, of directing and listening. A large group, like a symphony orchestra, will need more frequent direction and coordination. In a small group, facilitation is more akin to the leading of a chamber music group in which the leader is also a player who guides through more subtle indications. The choice of discussion format and group size will suggest the most appropriate use of the following skills by the facilitator.

Setting Clear Expectations

Participants need to understand the nature of the session and what is expected of them. The facilitator should begin with a clear setting of expectations. What are the overall goals for the session? What are the rules for participation? It is important to set up a supportive atmosphere in which participants can risk sharing incomplete or incorrect ideas without fear of ridicule. McCormack and Kahn (1982) compare discussion to a barn raising in which each person's contribution, no matter how small, is important.

Clearly formed, comprehensive answers by one person may not move the group toward a finished barn any more effectively than will cooperative construction of the major points. Setting this tone in the first minutes of the session is essential to stimulating participation.

Managing Time

In addition to clarifying expectations, the facilitator is responsible for managing time effectively. This task is much harder in a case-based workshop than it is in more traditional lecture and discussion sessions. A lively, exciting discussion can be difficult to end. With a good case, there is always more to discuss than there is time! Keeping Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning in mind, learning from an experience (here the case) may not be consolidated without sufficient time for moving beyond the specifics of the case to the formation of new concepts and principles that can be used to guide future action. The last fifteen minutes of a case-based workshop should be used to synthesize and elaborate on the ideas raised during discussion of the case. Summaries provide an opportunity to review what has been accomplished, to add essential points that have not been considered, or to provoke additional study of questions that remain unanswered. The facilitator can provide the summary or guide the group in generating one for itself. In either case, a discussion should never fade away. It should end purposefully within the constraints of the time allowed. It should look back over the discussion and forward into opportunities for the application and testing of new ideas.

Asking and Encouraging Questions

Questions are the major tools for building discussion, questions asked by participants of one another and to the facilitator and questions asked by the facilitator (Boehrer & Linsky, 1990). Open-ended questions (e.g., "What do you think is going on here?"; "What would you do?") are useful for encouraging discussion, while closed questions (e.g., "What do we know about the learners in this setting?") are useful for clarifying the facts of the case. A case discussion leader uses a mix of both.

In planning for a case discussion, the facilitator should consider the types of questions that might be helpful in accomplishing the objectives of the workshop. For example, if the faculty participants are expected to develop skills in reasoning through a teaching dilemma, the facilitator might plan to include and encourage the following types of questions:

- Asking for essential details of the case, e.g., "What are the facts?"
- Asking for a commitment, e.g., "What do you think is going on?"

- Probing for supporting evidence, e.g., "Why do you think that confronting the student would be the best approach?"
- Exploring misunderstandings or faulty reasoning, e.g., "Does everyone agree?"
- Forming relationships or generalizations, e.g., "How would your recommendations change if this were a math rather than a history course?"
- Encouraging curiosity, e.g., "How might you explain the unusual reaction of the female student in the class?"
- Exploring attitudes, e.g., "How does the learner view the situation?"

One of the most difficult balancing acts demanded of the effective group facilitator is the ability to ask just the right question at just the right time while encouraging participants to direct the discussion through their own questions.

Listening

A counterpoint to asking effective questions is the use of silence. Research confirms the average time that teachers wait between asking a question and calling on someone, rephrasing the question, or answering it themselves, is one second. In a review of research in this area, Tobin (1987) illustrated that extending the period of silence following a question to three seconds can improve the quality, quantity and length of students' responses.

The effective discussion leader spends more time listening than talking. This type of active listening involves attention to content and to feeling. It involves listening for relationships among ideas as well as among people. Listening entails decision making. When should a question be answered by the facilitator and when should it be turned back to the individual or the group? What is the best response to an incorrect or partially correct comment? When should the facilitator intervene with a question or a focusing comment? These questions are an important part of the listening process. Above all, facilitator comments during and at the conclusion of the discussion should clearly recognize the contributions made by individual members of the group. To be successful, the facilitator needs skills in careful and active listening.

Organizing and Structuring

Although the case discussion may seem less controlled than a lecture, there are numerous opportunities for the facilitator to give form and structure to the discussion. During the course of the discussion, she or he can provide or ask for brief summary statements to highlight divergent points of view or underline convergence, to indicate what has been accomplished and what remains to be done. He or she can use the blackboard or flip chart to highlight

the emerging organization of the discussion in a large group or encourage participants to do so in a small group. At the Harvard Business School, chalkboards seem to have a pattern of their own: facts of the case, varying explanations of the problem, possible solutions, potential consequences. Most teachers are much less thoughtful in what they record or fail to record on the board during either lecture or discussion!

Avoiding Common Problems

In spite of leadership from a skilled facilitator, discussions occasionally go awry. Although all of the factors that contribute to an effective discussion cannot be controlled — the case, the participants, the time of day — there are some common problems that can be avoided (Napell, 1976):

- Insufficient "wait time": "Wait time" is the time between asking a question and accepting an answer as correct or answering the question ourselves.
- Rapid reward: Responding "right, good" to the first answer offered may cut off further analysis of the issue.
- Programmed answers: Leading questions discourage thoughtful responses. These questions may also give participants the idea that their opinions are not of interest, that the discussion is really a game of "guess what I am thinking."
- A classroom climate that discourages risk taking: The following non-facilitative behaviors may make students feel that it is not safe to make an error: talks constantly; adds comments to each idea posed by a member of the group; rephrases each participant's comment; serves as final arbiter in all decision-making; interrupts, intimidates, ridicules.
- Closed questions: Although they may be necessary in establishing a data base for discussing a case, once the base is clarified, closed questions should be used judiciously.

Conclusion

The subtleties of leading discussion are almost infinite, and even experienced facilitators continuously strive for improvement. Nevertheless, the dynamics of the process are robust, and a sound basic approach—a few carefully formulated open questions and a supportive atmosphere of collaborative inquiry—will reliably lead to a satisfying outcome. Given the all too rare opportunity, faculty members are usually eager to talk about teaching; and engaging cases about teaching dilemmas give them a stimulating, productive, and enjoyable way to do so while providing a chance to experience new approaches to classroom learning.

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Other Resources

AAHE Teaching Initiative

Pat Hutchings is heading a new project to develop cases about college teaching and learning, including workshops on case writing. For information or to order cases, contact Pat: One Dupont Circle, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20036.

Center for Case Studies in Education, Pace University.

The Center has developed a series of cases for use in preservice and inservice teacher education. Contact Rita Silverman at (914) 422-4321.

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