

PART 1

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND ISSUES

The Case Study in Retrospect

Case studies have long been used, particularly in the teaching of ethical and social behaviour. Sometimes the cases have concerned gods and goddesses, at other times the characters have been animals or people. One has only to recall the Panchatantra, the Buddhist Jataka, Homer, the fables of Aesop, the parables of Christ, the legends of the Australian aborigines and the folk memories of peoples with a long oral tradition to establish the antiquity of the method.

It should not therefore be surprising that this apparently natural way of instruction should ultimately excite the attention of the social professions - including management.

Harold Stein³ has traced the development of the case study in the American context and records that

"... the case method was first introduced into law teaching ... at Harvard by Professor Langdall about the year 1870."

Law cases are of course different in that they may be used as precedents to guide future judgements but such precedents can be overturned by later rulings. Cases in other fields yield to less certain solutions or even to a variety of acceptable solutions.

From about 1919 the Graduate School of Business Administration at Harvard began collecting, writing and using cases that described the behaviour of people in business. The attraction to the technique of teachers of public administration from about 1948 led to the monumental work of the Committee on Public Administration Cases and to formally establishing the case method in that area of teaching.

Case studies had long been used in the teaching of management. One has only to recall, for instance, that the work of Taylor⁴ rested on highly specific case studies, that the early lecturers in educational administration tended to be experienced practitioners and that their methods tended to be substantially anecdotal.

During the 1950s there began a move towards a more formally structured case method. According to Griffiths⁵ four basic factors led to this:

1. Disenchantment with traditional administration literature.
2. The lack of theory and content of administration per se.

3. Introduction of social science research.
4. Concentration on the informal rather than the formal aspects of organisation arising out of sociology.

Griffiths has argued that because the basic rationale for the earlier use of the case method had become invalid it was necessary to broaden and supplement the former permissive approach with a more structured, theory-based technique. The term 'informal' in this context does not imply greater simplicity. It is used in a special sense to distinguish the more subtle and complicated patterns of leadership and control that emerge in organisations even though these might be officially and 'formally' structured in hierarchical fashion. Paradoxically the so-called 'informal' structure requires a more sophisticated technique of diagnosis and analysis.

We are indebted to Sargent and Belisle for the first substantial application of the 'new administration' to the structured use of case studies in teaching. They were also able to convey some of the excitement attending their researches into case study techniques:

"... For those who are willing to look upon education as an adventure, cases offer this opportunity par excellence: no one - neither instructor or student - can ever know or predict surely in advance all of what may be discovered in the examination of a case".⁶

Case Studies and the Administrator

The good administrator is one who gets things done. However, they must inevitably reconcile actions within the framework of a system and in such a way that the system is maintained while meeting the expectations of "significant others".⁷ As part of the art of administration they will no doubt deploy certain intuitive gifts and will have the advantage of some experience.

Notwithstanding those gifts of mind and heart they can also be assisted by training to develop and exercise a number of useful competencies.

Benne⁸ has identified the following as skills that might respond to training:

1. Sensitivity to other people.
2. Accuracy in perceiving demands and expectations.
3. Ability to gather information.
4. Ability to set priorities and to reconcile conflicts.
5. Flexibility and good timing when intervening in situations.
6. Self awareness - particularly of his own motivations.
7. Ability to translate judgement into action.
8. Ability to hold multiple and conflicting factors, forces and requirements in mind while judging, acting and evaluating.

These findings find verification and support from Culbertson et al ⁹ while recent descriptive studies by Duignan¹⁰ and Willis¹¹ of what superintendents

and school principals actually do have provided information as to the relative proportion of time spent on various activities and, hence, some indication as to what might be priorities for training.

There is some evidence to suggest that case studies as used in Third World seminars have tended to copy the less formal approaches common in the West prior to 1950. One reason for this could be that, while some excellent courses in educational administration are taught in Third World universities, practitioners in general have not had many opportunities to align their hard won practical experience with the appropriate body of theory, nor have the theorists generally been aware of the problems of the Third World.

The linking of cases and case methodology to the relevant base of theory is naturally of importance to the trainer-consultant who is already part of the academic discipline of educational administration. Practitioners may, however, be a little harder to convince and less ready to accept that the supposed dichotomy between theory and practice is an illusion.

Benne considers that traditional academic training in administration tends to have overlooked the elements of manageability and changeability when diagnosing and recommending administrative behaviour. Such training can be of immense value in suggesting to administrators what might be happening in a situation and also what might work as a solution but it cannot allow them to determine what will work. At that point administrators must desert science for art and examine what can be made to happen within given resources and constraints (i.e. manageability) and in the light of a situation that is never static (i.e. changeability).

Traditionally academic training, in Benne's view, tends to separate diagnosis from action. He holds that the use of case studies in training helps to redress this critical balance.

Types of Cases

Bridges¹² has divided cases into three types: issue cases, descriptive cases and substantive cases.

1. Issue Case

In this type of case there is the statement of a problem or problems together with sufficient background to enable the student to suggest a solution and to give reasons for his or her decision. It thus provides an opportunity for the quality of the decision to be discussed. Since there is no 'official' answer there is little 'threat' in the situation for the student.

2. Descriptive Case

This resembles the issue case but, since the solution is given the descriptive case provides the opportunity for the student to generalise from the particular solutions as to the theoretical considerations that appear to be relevant. It also becomes possible to discuss the constraints and values that led the administrator to a particular solution and to make an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of a particular organisation.

3. Substantive Case

A substantive case is essentially a research tool rather than an instructional device. In other words the substantive case

"... is designed to increase the substantive knowledge relevant to the study and practice of educational administration."¹³

The substantive case study was the major tool used by Selznick and other writers of the 'Institutional School'. An excellent critique of the work of this school together with numerous examples is to be found in Perrow's 'Complex Organisations'.¹⁴ Peter Blau's, 'The Dynamics of Bureaucracy'¹⁵ is a particularly fine example of the substantive case.

Bridges sees the need for substantive cases

"... which deal with the concepts of executive succession and organisational change, sequence of goals, displacement of goals, conflict between the formal and informal organisation, manifest and latent functions of organisations, differential perception and problems of communication, functions and dysfunctions of organisations, group norms and sanctions, and the system of official and unofficial inducements available to organisational participants."¹⁶

Characteristics of a Case Study

According to Griffiths¹⁷ a case study is "... a chunk of reality - a record of complex problems to which no solution is provided." While this definition has often been quoted with approval it misses an important point: while a case study might aim to be realistic it can never be reality. Inevitably it is at best an interpretation of reality as seen through the eyes of a reporter. Again when it is submitted to a group for discussion it undergoes a reconstruction of reality as interpreted by way of the selective perceptions and cultural emphases - even by the psychological hangups of the participants to the discussion.

Stein gathers up these ideas in a rather neat definition:

"... a narrative of events that constitute or lead to a decision or a group of related decisions.... Though cases do not represent absolute truth they do supply the kind of historical material that represents a sufficiently practical re-creation of reality to make analysis and discussion useful and meaningful to practitioners as well as to students."¹⁸

Assuming that case studies do have this kind of flexibility it follows that a case developed in Nairobi and presented in Raratonga will take on interpretations that could enable each group to work towards genuine solutions. It follows also that the more successful cases in this work will be those with the potential for multiple interpretation of reality and to which there will be no one 'correct' answer.

What then constitutes "... a sufficiently practical re-creation of reality"? And, in particular, how does one ensure that what re-creates reality in one culture retains this reality when submitted to analysis within a different cultural context?

According to Sargent and Belisle "... few of the products of personal reporting stand up as cases, in comparison with the more skilfully researched ones, when it comes to the crucial test of analysis and discussion."¹⁹ Nevertheless the recall of personal experience or the reporting of observed incidents provides the most readily available source of case material. Indeed with the resources typically available in the Third World, personal reporting inevitably forms a large proportion of the available material.

Should this material then be improved by editing?

Pigors and Pigors²⁰ warn specifically against the correction of the literary shortcomings or improving on the facts of such recall. They feel that, above all, the case must have integrity and that this is best achieved by accuracy - no matter how dull the case might seem! Each of the above authors however assumes that the writers of cases will already be aware of the characteristics of a good case. The pragmatic view is taken here that since a case only becomes valuable when it is in a form suitable for discussion, it is sensible to edit material to bring it within certain broad criteria. In the process, great care must be taken to leave intact the cultural identity of the case.

Criteria for Cases

Some cases will be more successful in use than others. While the success of a case can only be determined in use it is felt that the likelihood of success can be improved by devising cases that conform substantially to the following criteria:

1. Each will be a clear narrative of events.
2. Each will involve people and hence both formal and informal inter-relationships.
3. Each will be written as though by a detached observer.
4. Each will concern matters of policy rather than of technical procedures.
5. Each will be wide ranging to simulate interaction, i.e. each character will contribute from his or her own point of view
6. While each case will have defined time and space boundaries the action will be ongoing and open ended.
7. Each case will have integrity. "The code of the case writer obligates him to report nothing more than he saw, or knows to be factual, leaving his readers free to make their own interpretations and draw their own inferences."²¹

The application of these criteria is illustrated by the following example of (a) an actual case received from a participant during a seminar for primary headteachers in Mauritius and (b) the same case as rewritten within the criteria.

(a) The Case as Received

I will attempt to illustrate vividly a problem which I have encountered while in charge of a school in one of the southern divisions. As soon as I was posted there, my colleagues and friends warned me that it would be no 'easy' job on account of a particular teacher noted for his character. He was alcoholic. I agreed that was no easy task for me but I was posted there and had to stay there for at least one year.

I decided right from the start to tackle that knotty problem and had the fellow under close observation. I soon found that I had been well informed about his bad habits but, to my great surprise, he revealed himself - when in high spirits - to be a good teacher.

At the beginning, he showed a belligerent attitude specially when he had to admit that he had been 'caught'. That would degenerate in endless discussions when I would surpass myself in calmness. At times, when he was sober, I would have long and friendly talks with him and invariably they would end by solemn promises on his part to abstain definitely from alcohol. Those total abstinences unfortunately never exceeded a fortnight. And during those periods he was the most charming, the most amiable teacher. On one specific occasion, he even had charge of the school for a whole day and I was told he discharged his duty impeccably.

On the other hand, when under the influence of alcohol, he would be a real nuisance: disturbing the morning assembly, walking hesitatingly here and there, reclining, if not sleeping, in class, being over critical or picking quarrels with his colleagues - well, doing exactly the right thing to make me lose my head if not my temper. Besides, I had to sustain the remonstrations of the parents pestering me for the transfer of their wards to another class, the recriminations of the other teachers, the complaints of the domestic staff.

It was not gratifying at all to spend a lot of one's precious time to discuss either with a drunkard or with raging parents. All adverse reports - oral or written - were of no great effect. I had to be extremely cautious and to choose my words whenever reporting him. It was known that once, charged with an offence by the police, he pleaded his own case in court and won it. I took steps to have him transferred to another sector of the Public Service but did not succeed. It seemed that the Ministry's policy was to give him enough rope to hang himself. Meanwhile, I had to cope with my 'problem' teacher and save the good name of my school.

It is flagrant that had there been a good medical unit to look after people of that type or other unhealthy teachers, my work would have been eased off and that teacher would have been cured and actually would be leading a peaceful life.

But things went at their worst for that teacher; he drove my successor mad for five more years and recently I happened to learn that he had been either dismissed or pensioned off. .

What advice can we give to the Headteacher in question?

It will be noted that the case as received met a number of the criteria. It was a clear narrative of events, it involved people in interaction, it concerned matters of policy rather than of technical procedure and it had integrity. Nevertheless the writer had closed off rather than opened out discussion by pre-empting a number of the possible solutions. Because her intensely personal involvement shows clearly in the case she had made it more difficult for her colleagues in the workshop to discuss the incident dispassionately. In other words, it shows a critical lack of detachment on the part of the writer.

Re-written this detachment has been achieved by setting the case in the third person and by removing those parts that should emerge from discussion. At the same time great care has been taken to preserve the style and flavour of the original version.

(b) The Case as Re-worked

*Marie Bissett had been posted to the charge of a village school in a pleasant part of the island. As soon as the appointment was known her colleagues and friends warned her that the new job would not be easy because one of the teachers, Luke Martel, was an alcoholic.

Marie knew that she had to remain at the new school for at least twelve months and decided to tackle this knotty problem right from the start by keeping Luke under close observation. She soon found that she had been well informed about his bad habits, but, to her great surprise, he revealed himself, when sober, to be a good teacher.

At the beginning Luke showed a belligerent attitude, especially when he had been 'caught'. That would degenerate into endless discussions when Marie would surpass herself in calmness. At times, when Luke was sober they would have long, friendly talks and invariably these would end by solemn promises on his part to abstain. These total abstinences unfortunately never exceeded a fortnight but, during these times he was a most charming and amiable teacher. On one specific occasion Luke even had charge of the school for a whole day and Marie was told that he had discharged his duties impeccably.

On the other hand, when under the influence of alcohol, he would be a real nuisance, disturbing the morning assembly, walking hesitatingly here and there, reclining - if not sleeping - in class, being over-critical and picking quarrels with his colleagues and generally trying Marie's patience to the limit.

It was not long before parental disapproval surfaced. Jean Maurais and Elizabeth Chardommay called to demand that their children be transferred to another class and it was clear that other parents were of a similar mind. The recriminations of the other teachers and the complaints of the domestic staff added to Marie's troubles.

Marie knew that she was being forced into a choice between continuing to attempt to cope with Luke and saving the good name of her school.

What advice could be given to Marie Bissett?

*All names and locations are fictitious.

It might be noted that the case of Luke Martel has been edited so that it has become an issue case. It will be recalled that, in the issue case, "... the student obtains actual practice in decision making and has the produce and process of his thinking assessed in a risk-free social system, i.e. a setting which carries a minimum of threat to the student's professional career."²²

The case of Luke Martel could have been transformed into a descriptive case by simply changing the case as received from the first to the third person and by preserving the anonymity of the writer.

It will be obvious that a case which begins as an issue case can progressively take on the character of a descriptive case. In other words after decisions have been made to solve the problem or problems posed, the case has in effect been modified so that it can then be treated as a descriptive case. It is then possible to generalise towards concepts or to analyse the forces affecting an administrator faced with that set of problems. For these reasons most of the cases in this study have initially been treated as issue cases.