PART 1

THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. INTRODUCTION

The Case Study in Retrospect

It is usual to associate case studies with the training of lawyers, businessmen and doctors, with Harvard University being regarded as the pioneer of the technique. Yet case studies, though carefully researched and written as teaching tools, represent but slices of life, a photograph of a particular event fixed in time and space, so that it can lend itself to analysis. While the term is of recent origin, certainly the method is centuries old. All civilisations have their case law: stories passed down from generation to generation, adults to children, priests and religious leaders to followers, in story and drama, in initiation ceremonies. As H T B Harris has indicated in the companion volume, The Commonwealth Casebook for School Administrators, "One has only to recall the Panchatantra, the Buddhist Jatakas,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"...(1) to realise the pervasiveness of the case study approach. All, whether taken from real life, though sometimes disguised, or imaginary tales, have as their purpose an educative function; that being to exemplify principles and to influence behaviour. Their common strength is the act of involvement of the participants. The moral or message is deducted by the class member rather than being told to them by the teacher. Such has always been espoused by educators as appropriate professional practice; that it has not been adopted more readily and widely is indeed surprising.

What is a Case?

Professor Paul Lawrence says:

> A good case is a vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and the instructor. A good case keeps the class discussion grounded upon some of the stubborn facts that must be faced in real life situations. It is the anchor on academic flights of speculation. It is the record of complex situations that must be literally pulled apart and put together again before the situations can be understood. It is the target for the expression of attitudes or ways of thinking brought into the classroom.(2)

So, case studies provide an opportunity for the student of administration to step into the shoes of decision-makers and to experience a situation from that perspective. In order to achieve this, cases are normally written from the point of view of the decision-maker involved. Necessarily, the cases are situation-specific and the outcomes cannot be generalised from one situation to another, though there are occasions where a number of cases may reflect a particular theory and the skilled leader will use to full measure the

opportunities such occasions present. Another feature common to many training situations is the encapsulation of time. The case is a summation of what might have taken weeks in real time; the decision arrived at may also have been spread over a considerable length of time. That a case may be dealt with in two or three sessions, or that several cases may be examined in quick succession in an intensive workshop, does not appear to create the air of unreality that one might expect. Rather, the involvement becomes more intensive and the speeding up of time reinforces the major objective of case studies - the development of clear perceptions and analytical skills.

The range of topics for case studies is virtually limitless; hence there are no guides as to context, length or degree of specificity. Most cases, however, should include four components. First, since cases usually lead to decisions or to an analysis of why decisions or policies were made, there must necessarily be a description of the decision situation. The points at issue must be evident, or must be deducible from the evidence presented in the case. Second, the organisational context must be apparent - who will be affected by the decision, what variables are operating, and of these which are ones over which the decision-makers have control, which are beyond their control and which are subject to negotiation? Third, the case should include some background to the decision-makers themselves, for example, those with recommending authority, those with decision authority, and those with veto authority. Lastly, the case should present adequate background information so that the student can make appropriate assumptions concerning relevant issues and trends in the organisation being studied.

Value as a Teaching Method

As one Harvard professor has stated, the overriding educational aim of the case study method is "the development of proficiency in analysing administrative problems, reaching decisions as to desirable actions, and formulating programmes for making the decisions effective".(3) The method is both cognitive and experiential. Cognitive in that the students have a major role to play; they have to become immersed in the issues of the case, to explore and analyse the issues and present plans for a decision. Experiential in that they are confronting, in the classroom, issues which they are likely to come upon in their professional lives. The data is alive; the decisions they make are applicable to real events.

Other learning also takes place which is applicable to the work situation. The student learns to live comfortably where there is incomplete information, where there is ambiguity of solution in terms of there being several alternatives, none of which presents a totally satisfying outcome. He gains confidence in oral communication and competency in relating to peer group members. By repetition of real life situations he internalises appropriate administrative behaviours.

Such success depends very much on the skills of the lecturer who must be neither passive nor dominant yet remain an active participant. He controls the

learning through his selection and sequencing of the cases, through creating the appropriate environment for debate and discussion, through guiding the class members into unconsidered or ill-considered aspects of the case which are important, through challenging superficial thinking and through pacing the sessions so that time is evenly distributed over the various sectors of the case study procedures. The skilled leader intervenes to deepen and enrich the experiences of the students and to focus their attention on appropriate analytical tasks and conceptual frameworks.

Types of Case Study

Cases vary according to their objectives. Some provide the basis for a comparative analysis; as for example, cases describing policy processes in a number of higher education bodies in a federal system. Others may be developed as a means of exposing the social, political or managerial dynamics of a particular institution. Many, particularly those used for teaching purposes, cover decision situations and organisational problems.

On another dimension, Bridges(4) has identified three types: issue, descriptive and substantive. Issue cases state a problem or problems, a critical incident, together with enough background to enable students to reach a decision, though no official solution is provided. Descriptive cases present a situation which allows for an examination of the dynamics of the situation and for evaluation of its effectiveness. The third type identified by Bridges is the substantive case, a research tool rather than a teaching tool. Though this volume is not primarily concerned with case studies for research, it is interesting to note their value as research tools. A case study developed from a range of methodologies - document reviewing, interviews, surveys and observations - provides opportunity for both theory testing and theory building.* All three types of cases are included in Part II of this volume.

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*Those interested in case studies as research would find St John, E P "Case Studies in Higher Education Policy and Management", to be published by the Institute for Higher Education, University of New England, Australia, a useful source of information.