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Case teaching presents authentic, concrete teaching problems for students to analyze. For example, a teaching case in the context of a rural Alaska school describes a classroom fight between a native student and a white student. It provides background on the rural school and community, demonstrates what the teacher did, and shows what subsequently happened (Kleinfeld, forthcoming). As students read and discuss the case, they consider questions that teachers actually think about in such a situation: the causes of the fight, the two students' feelings and interpretations of the event, and the history of mistrust between the native community and white outsiders. As a class "unpacks" this chunk of reality, students become aware that such concrete classroom problems reflect not only pedagogical issues, but also matters of ethics, politics, and educational policy.

This Digest is intended for teacher educators, student teachers, and practicing teachers. The discussion describes the theoretical basis of the case method and examines the strengths and limitations of the case method. It also identifies sources of teaching cases, and it suggests ways teacher educators (and their students) can apply the case method.

THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE CASE METHOD

Teaching cases have long been a cornerstone of professional training in schools of business, law, and medicine. Recently, educators have begun to explore their value in the preparation of teachers (McCarthy, 1987; Shulman, forthcoming; Shulman, 1987). The surging interest in teaching cases stems from an increasing appreciation of the value of "narrative" forms of thinking as opposed to abstraction and generalization (Bruner, 1986). "The conclusions of much formal research on teaching," Bolster (1983, p. 295) points out, "appear irrelevant to classroom teachers--not necessarily wrong, just not very sensible or useful." Narrative forms of thinking are far more compatible with the ways teachers actually organize their experiences and develop professional knowledge.

In fact, professional knowledge in teaching and in other fields consists in large part of the accumulation of experiences in the form of concrete cases. Experienced professionals develop knowledge of the kinds of problems they are likely to encounter, what these problems actually look like, what usually causes them, and which approaches are likely to be productive in solving the problems. By providing vicarious experience with a variety of concrete cases, the case method expands and sharpens students' understanding of the profession.

Case method teaching also provides models of how to think professionally about problems. Students learn how to use theoretical concepts to illuminate a practical problem. They learn how to spot the larger issues implicit in what might seem to be a minor classroom decision. Teaching by the case method helps students learn how to think productively about concrete experience. The case method thus enhances their

ability to learn from their own experiences.

STRENGTHS OF THE CASE METHOD

Case methods are especially valuable in rural education. Cases can describe in vivid and rich detail what happens in small, rural schools. Such schools, unfortunately, are difficult to use as field placement sites for student teachers, primarily due to their distance from most university campuses.
Well written teaching cases:

provide vicarious experience with important teaching dilemmas;

illuminate the human intentions, feelings, and misinterpretations that are often the core of teaching problems;

provide models of how expert teachers think about actual teaching dilemmas;

increase students' repertoire of educational strategies by showing them how expert teachers approach problems;

help students learn to spot issues and think professionally about practical problems; and

provide emotional preparation for an unjust world.

Students enjoy learning from cases, which appeal to the universal delight in a good story.

LIMITATIONS OF THE CASE METHOD

Case method teaching is not a systematic means of transmitting facts, organizing knowledge, or teaching psychological concepts and pedagogical methods. Nor do cases give students practice in pedagogical skills. The case method supplements, rather than replaces, other methods of teacher preparation.
Some faculty find it hard to locate good case materials. Many are not sure how to go about teaching a case and fear that classes will degenerate into a pointless exchange of personal opinions.

SOURCES OF TEACHING CASES

Collections of teaching cases are just coming on to the market. Currently available casebooks are: Case Studies for Teacher Decision-making (Greenwood & Parkay, 1989); A Casebook for English Teachers (Small & Strzepek, 1988); and Case Studies on Teaching (Henson, Kowlaski, & Weaver, 1990).
A series of teaching cases centering on problems in rural, multicultural schools has

been developed by Judith Kleinfeld and can be ordered from the Publications Office, Rural College, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska 99775. The following titles are currently available: Malaise of the Spirit; The Teacher Who Came to Rivertown; Harassment in Lomavik; and A Troubled Student-Teaching Experience in Rural Alaska. (The first three are also available from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service: ED 308 028, ED 302 363, and ED 302 362, respectively.)

Faculty do not necessarily need to use commercially published cases--or even written sources--for teaching cases. Students often bring up stories of their own teaching experiences or field observations. Teacher educators can turn "anecdotes" into "cases." Students' anecdotes invite fuller description and consideration of the troubling situation, and the methods of case teaching can guide the discussion with an analytic framework. Faculty might, for example, ask their students such questions as:

What are the issues here?

What alternative strategies might you consider?

What is at stake here?

In short, a "teaching case" is not necessarily a piece of writing; it is a way of framing problems and analyzing experience.

WORK WITH YOUR OWN TEACHING CASES

Teacher educators can develop their own teaching cases to prepare students for the particular problems in a local context. The Alaska cases, for example, were developed by local teachers, faculty, and graduate students. The problems of teaching in remote Alaska villages with Yupik and Athabascan Indian populations are so unique that no relevant curriculum materials were previously available. This observation doubtless applies also to situations in many rural and small schools, or in other schools that serve ethnic minorities. The Harvard Business School (1989) publishes a helpful set of notes on how to write a teaching case.

Teacher educators can also use case-writing as an assignment to develop students' skills of reflective inquiry. In Alaska, for example, faculty ask students to write a case based on their student-teaching experiences. This assignment creates an opportunity for students to reflect on situations they found troubling. Students can examine these situations from different perspectives, evaluate what they did and what they might have done, and think carefully about what they might learn from their student-teaching experiences.

To prevent a case discussion from becoming superficial exchanges of opinions, faculty must think through what they are trying to accomplish--what issues the case illuminates, what theoretical concepts it illustrates, and what understanding the case can develop.

Christensen's (1987) Teaching and the Case Method is an excellent source for approaches to case teaching.

It is often helpful to divide a case discussion into two stages: (1) problem analysis; and (2) problem solving. The problem analysis stage begins with such questions as:

What are the issues here?

How does this same situation look from another character's viewpoint?

What went wrong here? The problem-solving stage begins with such questions as:

What would you advise the teacher to do at this point?

What might the teacher have done earlier to prevent the crisis?

What changes might prevent this problem from happening again?

CONCLUSION

The cases developed in Alaska give students rich descriptions of the kinds of problems they are likely to encounter in rural teaching. They also illustrate the ways to approach such problems. Case method teaching shows students how to think professionally about problems and it helps prepare them emotionally for representative problems. When students encounter such problems themselves, they will have met and thought about them before.

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