Student Generated Case Studies: Addressing the Standard of Ethical Leadership*

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1 Introduction

Educational administration instructors seek methods that will engage students' interest in the subject matter and also link educational theory to realities experienced on the job. An equally important goal and a most important lesson to impart to aspiring education administrators are the competencies exhibited in ISLLC Standard 5, "act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner" (CSSO, 2008). This, however, is a more difficult standard to teach and measure than the other standards. Teaching to most standards often results in observable products that can be evaluated such as a school improvement document. Ethical behavior, on the other hand, involves judgments that must be applied to complex and unpredictable school situations outside of the class setting.

This study was motivated by our experiences in using case studies as a pedagogical tool in our leadership theory classes for teaching objectives related to ISLLC 5, particularly the behaviors of self awareness, reflective practice, and transparency listed under Standard 5, Function B. When we began using case studies,

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we observed that students appeared most engaged when the situation was one familiar to them. Discussion was deeper and livelier when the context had meaning to them. We decided to formalize our observations and examine more systematically the case methodology strategies and determine the relative effectiveness of each. This led to our question: To what extent did reading and discussing a case study from a textbook, a classmate's study, or one that the student wrote him or herself impact the effectiveness of learning the six identified objectives? The six learning objectives we sought to implement and measure were the students' ability to: (1) think critically, (2) solve problems, (3) filter many sources of information, (4) use a decision-making process, (5) analyze complex concepts, and (6) develop inquiry skills. These objectives were adapted from previously identified case study learning objectives (Kowalski 2005; Murphy 2005).

2 Research on Teaching and Learning from Case Studies

Leadership scenarios that emulate ethical situations may be found in a variety of educational administration texts. Focusing on ethical considerations that leaders face, Kidder (1995) includes cases in which the leader faces a "moral dilemma." Moral dilemmas are distinct from "right-wrong" decisions a person might encounter. "Tough choices don't always involve professional codes or criminal laws. Nor do they always involve big, headline-size issues. They often operate in areas that laws and regulations don't reach" (Kidder, 1995, p. 15).

Strike, Haller, and Soltis (1998) and Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001) rely on school-based cases to frame the discussion about the nexus between authority, values, and decision making. While Kidder limits his discussion of leadership paradigms to ends-based, rules-based, and care-based, Shapiro and Stefkovich examine leadership through a different set of lenses: ethic of justice, ethic of care, ethic of critique, and ethic of the profession.

Willower and Licata (1997), reporting on their own use of case studies as a teaching tool in the university classroom, note that the case study format takes advantage of "teachable moments that arise naturally from the student's analysis of a case, student curiosity, and reflection" (p. 56). Scenarios may be generated by the instructor or by students working individually or in collaboration.

Earlier research also reported that the exploration of lived experiences by aspiring school administrators provided a basis for understanding how practicing administrators think and act (Danzig, 1997). Noting that "school administrators new to the job inevitably feel clumsy, unsure of themselves and [needing] help in how to think about the problems of practice" (¶ 2), Danzig suggests that, by writing and analyzing practice-based case studies, future administrators can develop key reflective and decision-making skills.

Mullen (2007) sought to link the importance of relevant learning with use of student-generated case study narratives in master's-level educational leadership classes. A key component of Mullen's teaching methodology was framing the case study as a collaborative effort by teams of students. Citing Lortie (1998), Mullen states that cases, employed as a collaborative strategy, promise to help students develop "analytical skills, creative reasoning, conceptual flexibility, and mature judgment" (p. 124). She observed that students became deeply engaged when empowered to explore situations that roused their curiosity and reflected genuine problems.

Neimyer (1995) documented how case studies, crafted as "sea stories," enhanced teaching and learning in a professional development setting. Whereas the students who participated in Danzig's (1997) study developed their own case studies based on interviews with administration practitioners, and Mullen's (2007) approach required students to collaborate in crafting their case studies, Neimyer's method relied on scenarios written by the professional development trainers themselves. Dubbing this pedagogical approach "sea to see," Neimyer suggests that case studies developed from practitioners' "sea stories" help participants to relate to actual events and apply information directly to their roles in the organization

Another study, by Kunselman and Johnson (2004), examined how case studies encourage critical thinking by requiring students to identify theoretical principles as they apply to actual situations. Citing Greek (1995), the authors state, "Active learning [through case studies] creates a classroom atmosphere of cooperative learning where students learn not only from the instructor but also from each other . . . and where they move beyond simply memorizing to understanding course materials" (¶ 3).

3 Preparing Students to Write a "Case"

In order to effectively facilitate student written cases, we believed that students must first be taught both to identify an appropriate case situation and to write a meaningful description. Thus teaching students to write a case become a multi-step process. First, we discussed the reasons to use case study as a learning vehicle. Next, we provided several cases from a text book for the students to read. We discussed the elements of each case including the dilemma presented and the theoretical perspective that might be used in analyzing the scenario. During the second class session we guided class discussion of the scenario using questions to encourage critical thinking. We then created a framework for students to use in writing a case based on their own professional experiences. Beginning in the third class session, students presented their organizational scenarios and applied their emerging sense of theoretical frameworks relevant to the course.

The process that guided the students in developing a case study for class included the following steps:

- Reflect on a situation that presented a dilemma or conflict involving an administrator.
- Describe the event and what led to it.
- Describe the stakeholders involved, their role, experiences, and interactions using pseudonyms to shield the identity of the players and their schools.
- Write a brief analysis describing what the administrator did or didn't do applying a leadership theory or decision-making frame we have discussed in class.
- Create questions to facilitate group thinking without attempting to resolve the conflict or speculate as to what might have or should have been done.
- Be prepared to lead a small-group discussion based on your case using effective group processing skills.

4 Study Method

The survey was administered to 2006-07 and 2007-08 participants in the principals credential program upon the completion of a required course, Theory in Educational Administration. Students were asked to rate the three types of case strategies (textbook, a classmate's, the students' own case) in relation to each of six learning objectives. Effectiveness was rated on a four point Likert-type scale, from 4 (Very Effective) to 1 (Very Ineffective).

The three-page questionnaire consisted of 29 forced-choice items comparing the three case-study approaches, as well as 2 items that asked the student to provide a reason for rating one of the choices higher than the others. The survey also included an open-ended question allowing the student to relate additional information, comments, or observations regarding her/his experience in class with case study learning. The survey was distributed in conjunction with administration of the usual end-of-term course evaluation.

A comparison of student responses, using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), permitted us to use student perceptions of text-based case studies as a reference point for their perceptions of the effectiveness of learning specified objectives using case studies developed by classmates and a case study that the student generated from her or his own experience.

5 Findings

Our analysis of the means that emerged from the two year combined data did not show statistically significant differences ($p \leq 0.05$) in student perceptions of the three approaches to case studies. Although the differences do not meet the standard for statistical significance, the means themselves suggest a trend: our students find more value for their emerging sense of ethical leadership in cases grounded in their own experiences and those of a classmate than in case scenarios found in a textbook. Thus the results of the current study may have more *practical* significance for educational administration instructors than may be suggested by the statistical analysis alone.

While relying on two years of data, the current study does not attempt to distinguish between samples drawn from different academic years. However, an examination of the most recent data, collected during

the 2008-09 academic year and disaggregated from the combined set, shows that the mean of our graduate students' perceptions of textbook-based cases was as low as 2.69, a rating of "ineffective".

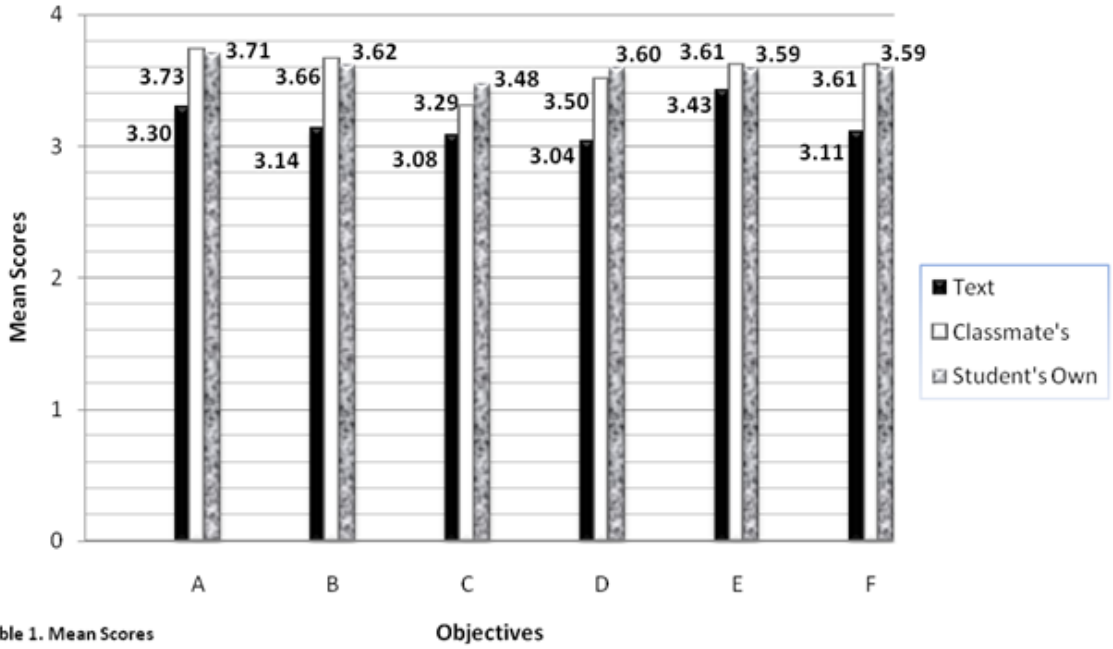

Figure 1

The following comments are representative of perceptions expressed by students on open-ended survey questions:

- "I think the student case studies were excellent—great to **reflect** on 'how would I handle this situation' as an administrator."
- "I appreciated the opportunity to discuss with peers to **solve the dilemma.**
- "I looked forward to hearing the case studies and having the chance to talk about them. They were realistic and grounded in issues related to **ethics and decision-making**. I learned a lot from writing my own case study."
- "Our cases match what I will encounter and made me **think of** what I need to **be aware of** as a principal."

6 Summary

We utilized Kowalski's definition of case method as a "technique whereby the major ingredients of a case study are presented to students for the purpose of studying behaviors or problem-solving techniques" (p.4). We sought examples in text and scenarios from our students that would faithfully reflect the realities of

school-based experience. We further sought to assess whether students learned identified objectives to a greater degree through one of the three methods of using case studies.

Student responses to all six objectives suggest a universally positive perception that comprehending nuances of ethical behavior likely to be encountered in a school leadership position is effectively accomplished through the case study teaching methodology. However, without exception, across all six objectives, responses show that students perceived that case studies written by peers and case studies they have personally crafted were preferable to scenarios they scrutinized in a text. Our data indicate that placing the student learner in the leadership role by writing and facilitating the case increases the likelihood of developing behaviors reflective of ethical leadership.

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