Communication Concepts in Action: Best Practices in Case Study Pedagogy in the Organizational Communication Course

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Abstract: Analyzing case studies is a useful way to assist students in drawing connections between organizational communication concepts and real-world experiences. As faculty members who teach organizational communication, we regularly use case study pedagogy. Case study pedagogy provides a rich narrative through which complex organizational communication concepts can be identified, analyzed, and reflected upon. This article provides 10 best practices for utilizing and assessing case study pedagogy in the organizational communication course. These practices include: to make clear connections between case studies and course materials, scaffold learning, choose a mix of cases, cultivate a sense of community in the classroom, enable self-directed learning, vary assessment formats, welcome ambiguity, evaluate analyses and provide directed feedback, use varied case study formats, and encourage students to write case studies.

Organizational communication is a theoretical and applied area of study that lends itself to the use of case studies (Alvarez, Bauer, & Eger, 2015; May, 2017). A case study is typically a short reading based on real or re-constructed events that tells a story involving a dilemma for which there is no clear solution (May, 2017). Case studies are useful active learning techniques because they provide students with

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the opportunity to critically evaluate a real-world example, apply theoretical and abstract concepts, and reflect upon organizational members' responses to a problem (Alvarez et al., 2015; May, 2017). Furthermore, research suggests that students who utilize case studies experience higher levels of learning and develop more realistic outlooks on organizational life (e.g., Banning, 2003). In the organizational communication course, instructors can choose from a variety of case study volumes (e.g., Fyke, Faris, & Buzzanell, 2017; Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak, 2010; May, 2013).

Over the last 3 decades, case studies have served as a prevalent pedagogical tool for organizational communication instructors. However, instructors sometimes face challenges in the implementation of case study pedagogy. These challenges may include (a) students experiencing difficulty understanding the relevance of the case study to the course content and their learning process; (b) students having difficulty understanding case studies that involve unfamiliar organizational stakeholders; (c) students deferring to the instructor for "correct" answers instead of offering their own perspectives; (d) students not coming to class prepared to discuss a case study; and (e) assessing students' varied responses to case studies. To address these challenges, we offer the following case study best practices for organizational communication pedagogy. As organizational communication instructors at the undergraduate and graduate levels, we rely heavily on case study pedagogy in our courses and have drawn from these experiences to develop these best practices.

Best Practice #1: Make Clear Connections to Course Materials

Case studies can be a useful pedagogical tool to illustrate complex organizational situations and how organizational communication concepts can be applied to them (Alvarez et al., 2015; May, 2017). However, the narrative nature of case studies can make it difficult for students to identify the course concept(s) that the case aims to illustrate. Thus, delivering a short lecture discussing the concept(s), assigning a reading, and outlining learning objectives helps ensure that students understand the concept(s) the case study is illustrating. Edited case study volumes often provide learning objectives; however, instructors should develop learning objectives if they are not available. Learning objectives will help students apply course concepts to the narrative without relying on the instructor to do this for them. To ensure that students are applying organizational communication concepts to the case study, Alvarez et al. (2015) suggested asking students to embrace the role of "communication consultants addressing organizational dilemmas . . . offering theoretically informed practical solutions" (p. 304). Asking students to assume this role is useful since it requires them to critically analyze the case using course concepts as opposed to only offering their personal reactions. After students have analyzed the case study, debriefing sessions should be held that provide instructors with the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings, further probe students' application of theoretical concepts, and encourage students to reflect on the application of the concepts to their organizational experiences.

Best Practice #2: Scaffold the Learning

Scaffolding is the idea that a learner should collaborate with a more able partner to achieve success in a task (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). The able partner organizes the learner's activities in ways that prevent him or her from becoming overwhelmed with new tasks and adjusts his or her contributions depending on the learner's current output (e.g., gradually increasing difficulty as the learner gains skills and confidence). Initially, the "able partner" may be the instructor, but as work progresses over the course of the semester a classmate could play this role as well. Scaffolding allows instructors to gain a sense of the extent to which students have previously been exposed to case study pedagogy and provides

the opportunity to develop a more collaborative instructor-student relationship. If students are novices, then instructors should structure simple, low-stakes learning activities early in the semester (e.g., analyzing a short case together as a class). Expectations for these foundational activities may focus on comprehending the material, identifying main characters and their actions, or describing how particular concepts are present in the case (e.g., different conflict management styles). As students become more adept at analyzing cases, students can individually examine more cases (e.g., written assignments) and then receive feedback. Instructors should expect that students demonstrate "critical thinking skills through analysis, reflection, and dialogue" (May, 2017, p. 216) for more advanced case-based assignments.

In our classes, we assign an individual written case analysis but scaffold by working through the exact assignment together (but with a different case)—first with students in small groups, then as a larger class discussion, and later by providing feedback on drafts. Scaffolding, then, becomes an important part of implementing case studies into the classroom as it prevents scenarios where students are asked to complete a case study having had no previous exposure to them. Furthermore, instructors should ensure that the student learning that results from scaffolding aligns with learning objectives such as to (a) identify and explain key concepts and theories of organizational communication; (b) describe the role of communication processes within and across organizational contexts; (c) explain current communicative issues facing organizations; (d) reflect on personal experiences within organizational contexts; and (e) enhance writing and presentational skills.

Best Practice #3: Choose a Mix of Familiar and Unfamiliar Cases

One of the benefits organizational communication instructors experience is that there is no paucity of examples to draw from in this course. We suggest using a mix of familiar and unfamiliar cases that vary in complexity. Students may find familiar cases particularly relevant to their professional and even personal lives; unfamiliar cases expose students to new ideas and perspectives that they may not acquire if they have viewed prior news coverage regarding the case. This mixture can be achieved through the use of published cases that focus on well-known organizations or reconstructed organizational events (e.g., Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak, 2010; May, 2013), the "Organizational Communication in the News" website that provides recent news articles examining organizational cases (Mitra, McDonald, & Fyke, n.d.), and newspaper articles for community organizations that students are likely to encounter if they plan on entering the local job market.

Instructors should select case studies that highlight diverse experiences in organizational life to further ensure that case studies are a mix of the familiar and unfamiliar. Ganesh (2011) argued that case studies are a useful pedagogical tool to spur student reflexivity and highlight organizational difference. Topics highlighting difference such as disability, gender norms, and generational differences will challenge students to consider the multitude of organizational experiences. Exploring complex issues within cases will keep students engaged as they come to better understand the wide variety of organizational issues that professionals experience.

Best Practice #4: Cultivate a Sense of Community in the Classroom

Cultivating a strong sense of community is a good idea in any classroom. However, doing so is particularly salient when using case study pedagogy because of the sensitive nature of some organizational issues and the common goal of facilitating honest classroom dialogue. Instructors serve as an impetus for creating a sense of community in the classroom by modeling appropriate attitudes, describing expectations, and

(perhaps) displaying openness and vulnerability themselves (Dannels et al., 2014). May (2017) explained that case study pedagogy is an opportunity for instructors to create a collaborative relationship with students that can "strengthen the classroom community via active, dialogic student involvement" (p. 217). Instructors who create this collaborative relationship reframe the instructor role as an active participant rather than as a manager and, hence, create a level of shared responsibility with students.

Case study pedagogy requires students to participate in discussion by asking questions, listening closely, and learning from others' perspectives (May, 2017). To this end, it is critical to establish clear expectations early in the semester regarding the nature of respectful class discussion. Students enact quality participation and perceive a supportive classroom environment when instructors incorporate and affirm students' contributions in discussions (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2004). Instructors can enact these behaviors when discussing case studies by directing students to "walk in the shoes" of each of the individuals in a particular case and view the dilemma from *that* perspective. We also would be remiss not to emphasize that neither students nor instructors enter classrooms as blank slates. Instructors should monitor their own responses to students who share personal perspectives and refrain from judging student perspectives that are different from their own. A possibility here is for instructors to explicitly describe their role in case discussions as a facilitator and that they will be evaluating student responses in terms of evidence for claims rather than grading based on whether they agree with a student's perspective. In some instances, it may even be valuable for instructors to utilize technologies that allow for anonymous comments to ensure all voices are heard.

Best Practice #5: Enable Self-Directed Learning

There are benefits to having all students analyze the same case study (e.g., enables full-class discussion) and there are certainly times when this is necessary. Conversely, there are instances when providing students several case options from which to choose is both possible and desirable. Such an approach can enhance student interest and self-directed learning. Lewis and Hayward (2003) argued that choice-based learning is a useful pedagogical tool for the organizational communication course because individuals often are encouraged in the workplace to participate in organizational decision-making. They found that students who are "practice-minded" (p. 155) believe choosing their own assignments helps to better align course material with professional relevance. In our hybrid courses, we have enacted choice-based learning by inviting students to develop Narrated PowerPoint case analysis presentations in small groups. We provide a short synopsis of several options and then allow students to choose a topic that best aligns with their interests or goals. This approach has been successful in our past classes because it lets students read more about topics of most interest to them and also creates space for new information during in-class presentations instead of the repetition created by presentations all about the same case.

Best Practice #6: Vary Case Study Assessment Formats

Students can analyze case studies through papers, exams, online discussion forums, small group analyses, think-pair-share activities, large class discussions, and more. Each format has benefits and drawbacks related to case study integration. The instructor's learning objectives should serve as the basis for the assessment and type of case study selected. For example, Wanguri (2005) used abbreviated case studies (fewer than 100 words) to help students quickly recall organizational theories in class. We have found this approach works well for short in-class discussions or as exam questions. Conversely, Long (2005) utilized one organization as a semester-long case analysis, which allows students to develop a deep understanding of the organization. Focusing in-depth on one organization provides the opportunity

to integrate the case into journaling assignments, ongoing in-class discussions, and group assignments. Using several (or all) of these assessment formats allows instructors to better integrate case studies throughout the semester.

Best Practice #7: Welcome Ambiguity

Case studies illustrate real-life scenarios and, like the real-life scenarios on which they are based, often do not have clear "right" answers (May, 2017). There are multiple paths that an individual in the scenario could pursue and students need to reflect upon the various options they would have at their disposal if they were in a similar situation. Banning (2003) stated that the ambiguous nature of case studies is beneficial to teaching students tolerance for ambiguity in organizational life. He observed that management students who used case studies in class were more tolerant of the ambiguous nature of the business world than students who were not taught using case study pedagogy. As an instructor, it is critical to inform students that the case is purposefully ambiguous and that they should be considering multiple perspectives in response. However, it also is important for instructors to explain to students that having no clear "right" answer does not mean that there are not wrong answers (e.g., students may misunderstand or misapply concepts).

One way to ensure that students understand that there are many potential responses is to develop open-ended questions to use during class discussion. For example, instructors can ask students to explain how they would navigate the dilemma if they were an organizational member in the case or how they believe the organizational issue could be resolved. Student responses to these open-ended questions provide instructors with the opportunity to question students' reasoning and to redirect students if they present an answer that is incorrect.

Best Practice #8: Evaluate Students' Analyses and Provide Directed Feedback

Although having ambiguity is desirable, it also is necessary for instructors to evaluate student work and provide regular feedback to ensure concepts are being correctly applied, discern whether students understand the process of case analysis, and encourage student self-regulation. Instructors should provide feedback to student case study analyses numerous times and in different ways throughout the course. For instance, if the class is divided into small groups tasked with analyzing a case, instructors may attend to each small group to provide corrective (e.g., if a term is being used incorrectly) and process-based feedback (e.g., praise for how the group is working through their analysis in a systematic way).

For more formal written assignments, a rubric is a useful tool for instructors and students alike. Sharing a rubric with students when the assignment is given increases transparency regarding expectations and can lead to improved performance (Panadero & Jonsson, 2013). Instructors also may share sample papers with students so they can gain a sense of what is expected. Rubrics for evaluating case studies should include criteria for assessing student writing (e.g., organization, clarity, appropriate citation), understanding of the organizational processes (e.g., extent to which course concepts are applied in accurate ways), critical evaluation (e.g., consideration of strengths and weaknesses of character decision-making), and reflection (e.g., relevance to future professional experiences). For each criterion, instructors can describe what differentiates grade achievement (e.g., exceptional, good, average, lacking)

by providing specific examples to students. Additionally, instructors can free-write comments to students to make corrections, offer praise, and probe further consideration.

Best Practice #9: Use a Variety of Case Study Formats

Traditional written case studies are easily accessible to instructors through edited volumes and textbooks. However, these types of case studies can sometimes be constraining to rich classroom discussion because they lack a visual element. As such, incorporating different formats for case studies can keep students engaged. Documentaries, television shows, and movies can all be integrated as cases in the organizational communication classroom (Heath & Isbell, 2015). For example, we have used the documentary *Blackfish* (Oteyza & Cowperthwaite, 2013) to discuss organizational crisis and change in our classes. Franzini (2007) made a strong argument for using the popular television series *The Office* as an organizational case study to be analyzed. Specifically, this television show uses a documentary-style narrative to illustrate everyday organizational communication processes and many students already are familiar with it for entertainment purposes. Varying the format and even complexity of cases helps keep students engaged in the material by preventing an overly formulaic classroom experience.

Best Practice #10: Consider Having Students Write Their Own Cases

With appropriate scaffolding, advanced students can develop their own cases and accompanying materials (e.g., discussion questions, learning objectives) as case writing is an effective practice that asks students to make connections to course materials and use creativity to highlight these connections (Bailey, Sass, Swiercz, Seal, & Kayes, 2005). However, students must fully understand the theories or concepts they hope to portray and how the theories or concepts intersect with workplace experiences to write a case study. In addition, this type of writing allows students to be creative and, therefore, engages problem-solving and innovation skills. Both of these skill sets are important in organizational contexts beyond the classroom. When assigning this activity, instructors will want to provide specific guidelines to help students be successful and may even choose to incorporate small checkpoint assignments along the way.

When we assign student-written case studies, we instruct students to reflect on their own organizational experiences, those experienced by friends/family members, and those experiences described in news stories and consider how these experiences intersect with organizational communication processes. Students then write a case that emphasizes dilemmas or challenges faced by an organizational member in this scenario. Students who write about personal experiences or those of their friends/family members are instructed to remove identifiable information, whereas those students who write using content from the news should use real and timely information. Students are encouraged to leave the events of the case unresolved. Once the case studies are written, students share and discuss their original case studies either in small groups or with the entire class.

Conclusion

Case study pedagogy continues to be an engaging tool to incorporate into the organizational communication course. We contend that case study pedagogy is of critical importance to the instruction of organizational communication as an applied and theoretical area of study. Case studies actively involve students in the course materials and provide them with a forum for discussing difficult topics

and sharing different perspectives. However, it is crucial for organizational communication instructors to appropriately use case studies to ensure that they are meeting clear learning objectives and that students are receiving the full benefits of this pedagogical approach.

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