Designing a Case Study

from the Popular Culture Text *Boston Public*

James Trier

Andre: Yo! Yo. Y'all chill on that "You're a nigger, I'm a nigger," all right?

J.T.: Yo, Dre, chill man, it's just me and J.T. It's cool, man.

Andre: [Shoves Jordan hard] You gonna tell me what's cool?

Jordan: Damn, nigger, you ought to loosen up.

—*Boston Public*

Introduction

In this article, I begin with a selective review of the case study literature that reveals that most case studies are based on "real," "actual," and "true" experiences. Next, I describe a case study that I designed from a fictional source—i.e., from an episode of the television series *Boston Public*. Then, I explain what happened when I incorporated this case study into my teaching of a methods course for secondary English preservice teachers in a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program.

Specifically, I discuss the preservice teachers' dialogue about the case study in terms of these two generally acknowledged claims (in the case study literature) about the productive potential of having student teachers interpret cases: (1) that the experience can become a communal, collaborative, dialogic one, and (2) that case studies can provide preservice teachers with the valuable opportunity to vicariously experience a situation they are likely to encounter later on in their teaching.

The purpose of this section will be to show that case studies based on fictional materials can have the same powerful effects on students as do case studies based on "real" (i.e., non-fictionalized) events. Finally, I suggest other fictional sources for readers to consider if they wish to design case studies for their own teaching practices.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that I am not claiming to have been innovative in my use of a case study, nor in the effects it had on students. That said, I do think that my drawing upon a fictional source for designing the case study is innovative and makes a contribution to the case study literature by suggesting a new source material to tap into for designing case studies.[1]

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Keeping It Real

Arguably, Lee Shulman's well-known *Educational Researcher* (1986) article titled "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching" (the article was also his Presidential Address at the 1985 annual AERA conference) sparked the development of what is by now a voluminous literature about the production and pedagogical uses of case studies within the field of education. During the first wave of case methods publications, which took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many casebooks appeared, and the journals *Teacher Education Quarterly* (1990) and the *Journal of Teacher Education* (1991) devoted special issues to the case method. Furthermore, Sykes and Bird (1992) published an important chapter in the *Review of Research in Education* about the case literature of the time titled "Teacher Education and the Case Idea." Following that first wave, the publication of more casebooks relevant to teacher education continued throughout the 1990s and up to the present. Journal articles about the use of the case method in teacher education have also regularly appeared.

In my analysis of the case literature that has been published since the appearance of Shulman's (1986) article, I found that most case studies are typically described as being based on real, true, and actual teaching and learning experiences. For example, in the *Teacher Education Quarterly* (1990) special-theme issue on case study teaching, each article discusses cases based on real experiences (see Bartell, 1990; Doyle, 1990; Florio-Ruane, 1990; Florio-Ruane & Clark, 1990; Kleinfeld, 1990; Merseth, 1990; and J. Shulman, et. al., 1990). Some of the authors explicitly state this, such as Doyle (1990), who asserts that a case is "'real,' i.e., an actual instance of practice presented in much of its complexity" (p. 10). Another is Merseth (1990), who defines a case (in part) as "a document based on a real-life situation, problem, or incident" (p. 54). Other authors convey that cases are based on real experiences through descriptions of the construction of specific cases, such as Florio-Ruane and Clark (1990b), who describe the real-life classroom milieu that was researched in preparation for the writing of a case study titled "Diary Time," based on the experiences of a second grade teacher and her students.

This same dynamic of basing cases on real experiences is also at work in the articles that appear in the *Journal of Teacher Education* (1991) special theme issue on the case method of teaching (see Barnett, 1991; Kagan & Tippins, 1991; Merseth, 1991; and J. Shulman, 1991). For example, Judith Shulman (1991) explained that cases "are original, teacher-written accounts" (p. 251), and original here means a real experience that actual teachers recount. Another example is Barnett (1991), who discussed a case "authored by a classroom teacher" that was "based on her struggle to help students understand some of the concepts underlying the multiplication of fractions" (p. 265). Along with these special theme issues, Sykes and Bird (1992) discussed more than 100 teacher education case articles, conference papers, book chapters, and books written during the first wave of case literature from the late 1980s and early 1990s, and all of those cases were based on real, actual educa-

tional experiences of teacher educators, veteran teachers, or preservice teachers.

This "real" assumption is also evidenced in casebook after casebook. For example, in the introduction for their book *Case Studies for Teacher Problem Solving*, Silverman, Welty, and Lyon (1992) explain that the dilemma cases in the book "are the true stories of practicing teachers" (p. xxiii). Another example can be found in the preface to the book *Getting Down to Cases: Learning to Teach with Case Studies*, in which Selma Wasserman (1993) explains that all of the cases she presents in the book "are based in the real world of teachers, children, and schools" (p. xiii). Wasserman wrote all of the cases, adapting material from "original cases" written by others, and conducting numerous interviews with teachers that "led to cases based upon critical incidents in the lives of beginning teachers" (p. xiii). One more example is from the preface of Colbert, Trimble, and Desberg's (1996) book *The Case for Education: Contemporary Approaches for Using Case Methods*. The authors explain that when they write cases, their "overriding concern is to make the cases real and to use authentic stories that illustrate key educational theories and bring up issues that are critical to the professional growth of teachers" (p. xiii).

The above examples are representative of the fact that nearly everyone who has written about cases since the publication of Shulman's (1986) seminal article has either directly stated or implicitly conveyed the belief that cases should be based on real experiences. And even when an academic challenges the idea that cases must be based on real experiences, the closest that academics seem to ever come to being open to the role that "fiction" might play in designing or creating cases is in the compositional act of slightly fictionalizing cases that are still based on the real life experiences of teachers.

This openness to the act of slightly fictionalizing real, true, actual events is expressed, for example, by Grossman (1992) in her chapter "Teaching and Learning with Cases: Unanswered Questions." Grossman observed, "Some advocates of case methods for teacher education have argued that cases in teaching must also be rooted in reality, representing true accounts of teaching practices," and she wondered what was gained

> by insisting that cases be "true"? Can cases be realistic without necessarily being real? To illustrate particular dilemmas of teaching, case writers may need to construct cases, elaborating on or altering true events for pedagogical purposes. Would these constructions necessarily disqualify them from inclusion in a case literature? (p. 229)

Though Grossman seems here to be advocating for the use of fictional texts as case studies, she actually remains on the familiar terrain of the "real" when she speculates that "true events" would still be the prime sources of the cases. So, Grossman herself ultimately remains "rooted in reality," as have those case writers who have produced cases by "elaborating on or altering true events" (see Wade, 2000).

At this point, it is relevant to state that Sykes and Bird (1992) had actually floated the idea that perhaps "poems, novels, or short stories may have unique value" for being taken up as case studies (p. 474), but they did not provide any specific examples of literary/fictional narratives that might be taken up. So though they articulated what I think is an excellent idea, they did not develop it in any specificity.

In the rest of this article, I will discuss my teaching of a dilemma case study as part of a methods course comprised of a group of secondary English preservice teachers in a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program. What distinguishes this case study from most (if not all) case studies that can be found in the case study literature is that it is not based on a "real" experience but instead derives from a fictional source: an episode of the television series *Boston Public*.

Specifically, the case study is made from 12 scenes that form one of the episode's three main storylines. As I will explain, through teaching this fictional case study, I was able to accomplish two goals that Shulman (1986) identified as being important in using case studies (that are based on "real" experiences): I was able (1) to engage the students in substantive dialogic discussions about an important pedagogical dilemma, and to (2) provide students with meaningful vicarious experiences of a dilemma they would likely experience during their student teaching.

Before discussing the case that I designed and how I engaged students in analyzing it, I will first summarize *Boston Public* for readers who have never seen the television drama.

Introducing *Boston Public*

Boston Public was a television drama that was broadcast on the Fox Network (and lives on in reruns and on DVDs).[2] The pilot for the program aired on October 23, 2000, and during the next four years, 81 episodes of the program were aired. In a typical episode, much of the action takes place within Winslow High, an urban school in Boston, though the plot does occasionally situate teachers, administrators, and students outside of school.

The main dramatic focus is on the principal, the vice principal, and a group of teachers. Although many students appear in each episode, most of the plots are concerned with the desires, thoughts, emotions, struggles, successes, failures, misjudgments, challenges, and disappointments of the teachers and administrators. *Boston Public* won Black Entertainment Television Network's Image Award after its first season, and there was an almost equal casting of Black and White main characters (the principal is Black and the vice principal is White—both are males).

Each episode of *Boston Public* is comprised of scenes in which we see depicted the everyday activities and events of schooling that all educators (as well as the viewing public) would easily recognize. For example, we often see teachers or principals meeting with parents; the school counselor meeting with students; students engaged in practicing some extracurricular activity, such as choir, orchestra, basketball, and soccer. So, many of the "core" visual elements of *Boston Public* capture the more everyday aspects of schooling quite realistically and recognizably.

Of course, as a prime-time television drama, there are no slow, dull days at Winslow High, and the program has at times been unrealistic, "over the top," and in some instances simply absurd. The main way this aspect of the program has played itself out is in how, during every episode, many crises of a violent, sexual, or life and death nature typically take place—more crises in one school day than typically visit a "real" school during an entire academic year.

Nevertheless, *Boston Public* has dealt quite realistically with a plethora of important educational issues that have also been addressed in academic literature on education, as well as by the news media. For example, there have been episodes about budget cuts, standardized testing, teacher certification (or alternative routes into teaching), cheating on tests, gay-bashing among students, sexual relations between teachers and students, bullying, violence in school, the use of Ritalin, and literally dozens of other issues relevant to education. Because the program deals with so many relevant issues related to education,

it is a rich text that has the potential to be taken up for a variety of critical pedagogical purposes, one of which is to design case studies.

The "N-Word" Case Study

In the next section, I will discuss how I pedagogically used a digital case study that I designed from an episode of *Boston Public*. In this section, I need to introduce this case to the reader. The storyline of this case is one of three storylines developed in a one-hour episode of *Boston Public* (the episode aired on February 25, 2002). The case is comprised of 12 scenes, and I used iMovie to create a DVD that features these 12 scenes as individual scenes that the students could access for repeated viewing or as a series of scenes that can be viewed all at once, without interruption.

The total length of the case is 20 minutes, with some scenes much longer than others. In the rest of this section, I will summarize what takes place in some of the main scenes so that the reader can have some sense of the content that the students analyzed. Also, here is a list of the main characters in the case (in order of appearance):

Jordan: White male student

J.T.: African American male student

Andre: African American male student

Danny Hanson: White male teacher

Brooke: African American female student

Debbie: African American female student

Marla Hendricks: African American female teacher

Steven Harper: African American male principal

Marilyn Sutor: African American female teacher

The storyline begins when a White student named Jordan and a Black student named J.T. (they seem to be juniors or seniors) who are friends refer to one another as "nigga." As the boys enter a classroom before the bell rings, a (White) girl in the doorway says hello to them both, and as they move away from her, this dialogue takes place:

> *Jordan*: I told you she was hot on me, man.
>
> *J.T.*: Ah, nigga please, she was smiling at me, not you.
>
> *Jordan*: You?
>
> *J.T.*: That's right.
>
> Jordan: Man, she's way too happenin' for a nigga like you.
>
> *J.T.*: C'mon, get serious.

At this point, a Black student named Andre (also called Dre), who has heard this exchange between Jordan and J.T., comes over to them and confronts them:

> *Andre*: Yo! Yo. Y'all chill on that "You're a nigger, I'm a nigger," all right?
>
> *Jordan*: Yo, Dre, chill man, it's just me and J.T.. It's cool, man.
>
> *Andre*: [Shoves Jordan hard] You gonna tell me what's cool?
>
> *J.T.*: Damn, nigger, you ought to loosen up.

Andre angrily shoves Jordan out of the way, and he an J.T. lock up and end up falling to the floor, fighting. The teacher, Danny Hanson, enters the room and breaks up the fight. He then asks the boys what's going on, what precipitated the fight. After some silence, Andrey glares at Jordan and J.T. and then says to Danny: "It's simple, Mr. Hanson. We're playing 'eenie meenie minee moe,'" adding "You know—'catch a nigger by his toe.'" Mr. Hanson gives them a puzzled look as the scene ends.

When Danny learns what the situation is (scene two), he suddenly decides to postpone the day's scheduled exam in order to discuss the important issue of the politics involved in using language within certain discourses—particularly the term "nigga."[3] Danny asks someone to start the discussion, and a girl named Brooke volunteers to go first:

> *Brooke*: I think if Andre knew the context and intent in which Jordan and J.T. were using the word—
>
> *Andre*: —Then it would be OK?
>
> *Brooke*: I didn't say that—but, the fact is, I do hear guys that use word, including you. And I've heard you listen to rappers that use it.
>
> *Andre*: Black rappers.
>
> *Jordan*: What? Black people can use it, but Whites can't?
>
> *Andre*: That's right.
>
> *Jordan*: That's racist.

This exchange between Jordan and Andre causes the rest of the students to begin talking animatedly about whether it is or isn't racist. Danny quiets them down and brings them back to the discussion as a group:

> *Danny*: Hey, Hey, Hey. Hey you guys. Come on! Listen, you guys ever stop to think that if a word stirs up so much hate, it makes one person take a shot at another person, then maybe the word has too much power.
>
> *Debbie*: Fine, then people shouldn't use it.
>
> *Danny*: Well, that would be one solution. I don't think it's very realistic. Another solution might be to try to take away its power.
>
> *Andre*: How?
>
> *Danny*: Well, Brooke mentioned intent, right? Jordan and JT are friends, best friends. Black guy, White guy—doesn't matter, right? Both "niggas"—like "homeboys" or "buddies."
>
> [The students suddenly look uncomfortable with Danny's use of the word "nigga"—it's clearly visible on their faces and in how they shift in their seats.]
>
> *Danny*: It doesn't matter to them, right? Andre?
>
> *Andre*: I don't like when Jordan says it. I don't like when you say it.
>
> *Danny*: Well, I hear you. What about if a, ah, Harvard Law professor says it? What about if he writes about it?
>
> *Andre*: Now I don't know what you're talking about.
>
> *Danny*: Alright. I'm talking about there's this new book written by a Harvard Law professor. His name is Randall Kennedy. It's all about this. It just became your new, uh, class assignment.

In the next scene (scene three), Marla Hendricks (known in the series as a very outspoken teacher), confronts Danny in his classroom, saying: "Mr. Hanson, what is this I hear about you teaching your class to use a certain word?" Danny denies that is what he is doing and attempts to explain his reasons for what he is attempting to explore with the students in class, but Marla refuses to listen, stating:

> *Marla*: No! You don't get to explore that!
>
> *Danny*: I don't? Or one doesn't? What? I don't get to explore that because I'm White? Because that's one of the questions we're talking about. Maybe you should come by my class.

Marla tells Danny she will be taking up the issue with Principal Steven Harper, and in scene four we see her catching Steven in the hallway between classes, telling him about what Danny has done in class and stating her opinion: "I mean no teacher should use that word, anywhere, anyplace,

especially a White teacher. If that makes me racist, I don't care."

The next day (scene five), Danny shows a segment of a Chris Rock comedy routine in which Rock uses the term "nigga":

> It's like a civil war going on with Black people and there's two sides—Black people and there's Niggas. [Audience in video laughs.] And niggas have got to go. [Students laugh.] And I see some Black people lookin' at me [saying], "Man, why you gotta say that? Why you gotta say that? It ain't us, it's the media. The media has distorted our image to make us look bad." [Students continue laughing.] Ok, but when I go to the money machine tonight, awright, I ain't lookin' over my back for the media—I'm lookin for niggas!

Danny turns off the television and then poses the question of why Chris Rock can use the term but a White comedian should not. The following dialogue takes place, with Danny playing devil's advocate to generate questions:

> *Debbie*: Because when a White man uses the word, it smacks of bigotry. Right or wrong, that's just the way it is.
>
> *Danny*: Come on. The way Chris Rock was using the word, I mean, that seems more like bigotry.
>
> *Andre*: No, because Chris Rock has a pride in African Americans. Chris Rock knows Black History, and that routine, it's like he's challenging a Black man to take responsibility for his image. And his anger and humor, it comes from a place, it doesn't put us down. If a White person uses the word, it puts us down.
>
> *Danny*: Ok, so let me get this straight. If Chris Rock were White and he knew everything he knew and felt everything he felt, everything was exactly the same, you'd still have a problem with him using the word? Simply based on the color of his skin?
>
> *Andre*: Yes.
>
> *Danny*: Why?
>
> *Andre*: Because if Chris Rock were White, he wouldn't know what he knows.

By the end of the scene, Danny looks over and sees Principal Steven Harper standing in the doorway, a look of disapproval on his face. In the next scene (scene six), Danny is in Harper's office, being chastised:

> *Harper*: I don't want you doing it.
>
> *Danny*: Well, may I ask why?
>
> *Harper*: Because, Danny, it pushes controversy to the point of being irresponsible. The word stirs up too much hatred, and no offense to your gifts as a teacher, but you don't have the answers on this one.
>
> *Danny*: Well, to me teaching is about asking the questions.
>
> *Harper*: Well, I don't want you asking this question. Not in my school.
>
> *Danny*: Look, with all due respect, this is not your school. Ok? I mean the school is entrusted to your leadership and I don't think shutting down dialogue—
>
> *Harper*: —Danny. Danny, every once in a while I get to make a call. I'm making one here. Drop this line of discussion in your classroom.

Danny presses Principal Harper for an explanation, and Steven ends up telling Danny that if he continues with the "line of discussion," he will fire Danny.

In the next scene (scene seven), Danny is talking with a union representative who advises Danny to stop exploring the issue of "the n-word" in his class:

> Years ago a basketball coach heard his players calling each other "nigger," with affection, like you say. Most of them were Black. Coach brought them together, asked if he could use the word. They all voted yes. He did, they didn't mind. He was fired. Couple of years ago a college professor in Kentucky did just what you're doing, tried to explore the power of the word. Fired. Why? The context always gets lost in the firestorm. The uproar will be that you used it.

By scene eight, Danny has made copies of the book *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* by Randall Kennedy (2002) available to all the students, and they have come to class prepared to discuss it. Danny at first tries to avoid discussing the book, but the students express their great interest in discussing it, so Danny agrees:

> *Danny*: All right, Andre, I'm listening. What do you, what do you got for me?
>
> *Andre*: Everybody's asking why can Blacks say it, but Whites can't? Why can Tupac say it and J.Lo can't? And I admit, it's like a double standard. Well, this professor, he nails it. "Nigger"—it's like a White supremacist's word. They give it its power and they give it its ugliness. When Blacks use it, it's like we're taking the word away from them. We're making it our word. We're taking power away from the racists.
>
> *Danny*: Ok, but there's a lot of non-racist White people. I mean, why not let them join the fight? I mean, can they use it and help, uh, try to take the word away from the skinheads and such?
>
> *Debbie*: No, because when a White person uses it, someone might think that he is a White supremicist and it fosters the ugliness.
>
> *Danny*: Ok, that's very good Debbie.
>
> *Debbie*: I read that in a book.

In scene nine, Marla Hendricks and another African American female teacher named Marilyn are in Principal Harper's office (Danny is not present). Marla vehemently objects to what Danny is doing, Marilyn disagrees with her (supporting Danny's pedagogical decision), and ultimately Principal Harper decides to tell Danny he cannot discuss the book nor the issue anymore in class. In scene eleven, Principal Harper orders Danny to comply, implying serious, negative, formal consequences if Danny disobeys (he'll be fired), and the scene ends with this exchange:

> *Harper*: I don't believe you have the right to teach it.
>
> *Danny*: What, because I'm White?
>
> *Harper*: Yes, Danny, because you're White, my friend. Trust me when I tell you that unless you've been on the receiving end of this, you truly don't get it and you don't have the right to be standing at the top of a class trying to teach it.
>
> *Danny*: You know, you want to stop me from standing at the top of a class, Steven, that's your right. You're the principal, but what about my students, huh? They keep asking me questions about this and you want the word taken out of circulation? I can certainly understand that, but you don't have the power to take it out. You'll never have that kind of power. You know that, right? You're—you're claiming some priority here as a Black man. You know what, I'm not going to fight you on that. So why don't you do this, why don't you teach the class, my friend?

In the final scene (scene twelve) of the case, we see Principal Harper enter Danny's classroom and announce that he will be leading the discussion that they had been having with Danny Hanson, who is absent from the room. (Danny is not fired, and this storyline is not continued in the subsequent episodes of the program.)

Just Like the Real Thing

The group of preservice English MAT students that I engaged in viewing and analyzing the *Boston Public* case was made up four White males, three African American females, and 10 White females. Because I wanted students to be able to view the case study multiple times

to deepen their analyses, I loaned each student his or her own copy of a DVD of the case. The format of the DVD enabled students to play the scenes all at once or separately, which meant that they could view the scenes repeatedly and go back and forth among the scenes, deepening their engagement with the total case. I also posted this prompt on the Blackboard discussion page:

> View the *Boston Public* case study and then post at least two times (more, if you wish). In the first post, develop a response to what happened in the case. Do you agree with a character's decision? Do you disagree? How do you see yourself handling the situation from the teacher's perspective? These are merely a few suggestive questions for you to consider. You should then read all of the posts and reply thoughtfully to at least one of them. Then, make sure to read all the replies before coming to class.

In the rest of this section, I will analyze some of the students' interpretations of the *Boston Public* dilemma case according to two main claims made about case learning—i.e., claims about what kinds of valuable learning can take place when students engage with cases based on "real," "true,' "authentic" experiences or events. My purpose here is to show that students' engagements with a fictional case study brought about the very kinds of learning experiences that are claimed for case learning using "real" experiences.

Communal, Collaborative, Dialogic Group Discussions

One generally acknowledged claim about the productive potential of having student teachers interpret cases is that the experience can become a communal, collaborative, dialogic one. Shulman (1996) explained that

> case methods nearly always emphasize the primacy of group discussion, deliberation and debate in the examination of a case. The thought process of cases is dialogic, as members of a group explore different perspectives on the nature of the problem, the available elective actions or the import of the consequences. (p. 211)

That the *Boston Public* dilemma case engaged students in "group discussion, deliberation and debate in the examination of a case" is suggested through a few facts. During the week when they analyzed the case, students were required to post at least two times, and I did not specify in the prompt how long the posts had to be. What happened was that the students collectively made 93 Blackboard posts totaling more than 25,000 words. Many of the individual posts were over 500 words, and some students posted five or six times during the week, leading a few students to develop overall interpretations of the case of more than 3,000 words. These facts alone suggest the students' great interest in and collaborative engagement with one another about the case study.

Beneath these suggestive surface facts, I discovered through my analyses of the postings that the students collectively produced a diverse set of interpretations of the main characters, events, themes, and dilemmas constructed in the case, and some of these interpretations inevitably were quite different from others. In other words, within the 93 Blackboard posts are many examples of how students dialogically engaged in "deliberation and debate . . . as members of a group" who explored "different perspectives on the nature of the problem."

For example, one problem or issue that nearly everyone examined concerned whether or not a White person should say the word nigger in an academic setting, and whether a White teacher should attempt to engage students in a discussion about the various politics (cultural, historical, economic) inevitably bound up with the word. The first articulation of this issue occurred when a White female named Rachel posted an opinion (it was the second post of the 93 total posts, so it set into motion a series of exchanges). Rachel stated that she had "conflicting feelings about Mr. Hanson not being able to use the word or conduct the discussion about it simply based on the criteria of his skin color." At one point in the same post, Rachel wrote that Principal Harper's decision to remove Danny from the classroom, thereby shutting down his pedagogical inquiries and actions, was

> a perpetuation of racism and an irony because the "n" word is racist. The principal, in my opinion, reinforced the notion of "right" or "power" based on skin color by taking over the discussion and excluding Mr. Hanson from participation. Mr. Hanson had no ill intentions and only used the word in an educational context as a teacher to reduce its power.

Many students responded to Rachel's argument, one of whom was a White male named Jesse, who advanced the argument that an African American's use of the word can be part of a process of "taking back power," but that no White person can participate in that process, which is something Rachel had been arguing for. Jesse wrote in one post:

> I agree with the author of the book [Kennedy, 2002] and Andre's analysis [scenes 2 and 5] that when African Americans use the word they are taking back power. This makes sense to me. Whether [White] people like it or not, if you are White and you use the word (no matter the context, friend or not) misunderstandings are possible and it could imply something different (ex. the *Boston Public* clips). The mere THREAT of this implication should be enough to keep White people from using it. On the other hand, I have no problem with Black people using the word. Why shouldn't they have the right to take a word back that was used for years to oppress them? I don't think that all African Americans use the word with this idea (taking back power) in mind. For many, it seems to have become just a part of their personal dialogue, used with little thought. This is a whole different issue. Hence the need for discussion.

In the above examples, two White students disagreed on the issue at hand. As more students joined the discussion of this thread, nearly everyone shared Jesse's opinion and disagreed with Rachel (who continued to clarify and reiterate her argument and reasoning). At one point, another student—an African American female named Theresa—interpreted the figure of Danny Hanson in a way similar to Rachel. Theresa began her interpretation by encapsulating the dilemma represented in the case as revolving "around whether a White man should even speak the word nigger and whether he had the right to discuss the word." From here, she went on to say:

> Personally, I do not have a problem with the word being used [i.e., spoken] or discussed in the academic setting. I believe that discussions of the word involve discussions of history, present day race relations and even a discussion of ethics. By discussing the word nigger, we are forced to examine the origin of the word, which according to [the] *Boston Public* [case] actually had benevolent beginnings [a reference to Kennedy's (2002) book]. . . . I think that Mr. Hanson's use of an outside reading [Kennedy, 2002] was superb. This gave the discussion a reference point outside of Mr. Hanson's own personal views. Maybe if students are given an opportunity to really explore the historical implications of the word they would be less apt to use the derivatives of the word like nigga so loosely. . . . If other teachers handle the situation as Mr. Hanson did, classrooms could really begin to inform students about human dispositions to hurt, discriminate, love, and commune with each other.

As I think is clear, Theresa's analysis is quite substantive and developed, and her writing of the word nigger was, in my opinion, a pedagogical provocation (on Blackboard) in that her post came late in the week, after many White students stated that they could not even bear to write the word. In a sense, Theresa had a "last word" on the issue (though all of this posting came before the scheduled seminar, so many more words about the issue were had).

In the above examples, I have attempted to suggest how students engaged in a dialogic, communal exchange in response to the dilemma posed in the *Boston Public* case. Now, I will turn to another important aspect of the students' engagement with the case.

The Value of Vicarious Experiences

Another generally acknowledged claim about the value of engaging students in analyzing case studies concerns the productive potential of vicarious experiences. As Lee Shulman (1996) explained, cases

> permit the student to experience vicariously a far larger number of different situations than would ever be possible through direct personal experiences. Cases thus become simulated residencies, transporting students to settings and dilemmas they would be unlikely to experience directly. (p. 27)

Grossman (1992) also articulated this claim when she defined dilemma cases as narratives that "portray dilemmas of teaching practice that provide students with vicarious experiences; discussion of these cases helps develop ways of thinking about the dilemmas" (p. 230).

Through engaging with the *Boston Public* case, students vicariously experienced the dilemma that the pedagogical figure of Danny Hanson was navigating. Collectively, the students articulated a variety of interpretations of him, and the general consensus that emerged from this robust thread of discussion was that most students believed Danny Hanson had the right idea, but they also had mixed feelings and opinions about whether or not he did the right thing. In writing about Danny Hanson, students (1) interpreted his critical pedagogical intents and goals, (2) interpreted his pedagogical decisions and actions, (3) suggested alternative courses of action that Danny should have considered instead of what he chose to do, and (4) speculated on what they themselves would have done in the same situation as Mr. Hanson. Some students wrote about all of these areas, while others wrote about some of them.

An example of a student who wrote about all four areas is a White male student named Keith. (This example is representative of the way that many students wrote about Danny Hanson and the dilemma he faced.) Keith prefaced his interpretation of Danny Hanson with a philosophical statement about teaching that resonates with that of critical pedagogy. Keith wrote:

> One of our goals as teachers is to empower our students and develop in them the ability to think about the world. We talk all the time in this program about social justice, equity, empowerment, and other ideals that we believe should exist in a democratic society.

Keith then implies that this was Danny Hanson's goal, saying: "If Mr. Hanson simply ignored the conflict that arose from the use of the word, he would be doing his students a disservice."

Keith also explained that he liked that "Mr. Hanson brought in literature that addressed the issue" because Kennedy's (2002) book "allowed students to engage the topic on an intellectual level and helped to remove some of the emotion from the debate." Though Keith thought some of Mr. Hanson's decisions were good ones, he also thought that generally "the method in which he addressed the issue may not have been the best course of action." More specifically, he critiqued Danny's method and offered an alternative approach:

> Would I have done what Mr. Hanson did? I would certainly have discussed the event in class and allowed the students to explore what happened to create a better sense of understanding. I also would have sought out help from others and brought different voices into the classroom, because as a White man there is no possible way that I can understand the full power of the word. If there had been a more open discussion among faculty, perhaps the principal could have joined the class as an equal partner and alleviated some of the tensions of the faculty. I do not think that I would say the word myself (it would be hard for me to even type it here), because of the connotation that it carries for me personally and the hostility it could cause in my students.

In the above quote, Keith implies a critique of Danny Hanson's use of the word "nigga" (scene 2), echoing Principal Harper's explanation to Danny Hanson (scene 11) when he (Keith) says about himself that "as a White man there is no possible way that I can understand the full power of the word."

For Keith—as for all the students—the *Boston Public* case transported him to a virtual setting and engaged him in vicariously experiencing a dilemma that he very likely might find himself facing in his future as an English teacher. We can see him imagining what he would do and we learn his rationales for his possible actions. We also see that he is still developing his thinking about the dilemma of whether or not he "would say the word" himself.

As mentioned earlier, many claims are made about the value of teaching with cases and I have only touched on two of the main ones. That said, I think the passages I have quoted reveal that the student teachers became seriously involved in thinking through the dilemmas posed in the fictional case.

Brief Remarks on Discussing the Dilemma Case during Seminar

How did this fictional case, which was discussed so intensely on Blackboard, play out in the face-to-face situation of a seminar? Very well, and as it happened, two colleagues were scheduled to do a formal, required observation of my teaching on the day of the seminar discussion of the *Boston Public* dilemma case. One passage in the observation report describes the students' interactions during the seminar discussion:

> Students were clearly very familiar with and comfortable with the whole class discussion format. Almost all students demonstrated effective communication and expression skills. Their active participation and intellectual articulations show they understand the objectives of the discussion process—to examine, appraise and share information about a specific issue/topic by viewing things from different perspectives. The discussion focused on a race issue; however, we did not observe any tensions among the students. Students sharpened their own viewpoints through respectful exchanges of ideas as well as through lending hands to their classmates' reasoning processes. They were reflective in evaluating each other's ideas and also moving forward to create new ideas.

My own impression of the seminar discussion also is that it went very well. The students returned to issues they had raised during the week on Blackboard, they clarified their arguments, asked one another questions to elicit further thoughts, and generally the face to face discussion mir-

rored the lively, engaging, provocative discourse that unfolded during the week on Blackboard.

Conclusion: Other Popular Culture Texts as Sources of Case Studies

In this article, I have developed one detailed example of how a fictional text can be taken up as a provocative, engaging case with preservice teachers. Though I have devoted exclusive attention to one *Boston Public* dilemma case, I have made many other cases from *Boston Public*, cases that are similar in format in that I bring together related scenes that create the storyline about a particular topic. So I would recommend that teacher educators interested in taking up *Boston Public* as a source for fictional cases should begin recording the program when it is rerun on television (which is quite often on various channels), or purchase the 81 episodes from any of various internet sellers.

I also recommend another rich source material—what I call "school films." I define school films as films that are in some way, even incidentally, about an educator or a student. Some well-known school films are *Mr. Holland's Opus*, *Breakfast Club*, and *Dangerous Minds*. Some lesser-known films are *Drive Me Crazy*, *Flirting*, and *The Class of Miss MacMichael*. Some obscurer films are *Elephant*, *Zero for Conduct*, and *Torment*. My main approach has been to conceptualize an entire film as a case study, and to make the cinematic case study the central text in a project comprised of the same sequential activities as the project involving the *Boston Public* case case described in this paper.

For example, I have taught Truffault's (1958) classic film *The 400 Blows* as a case study that constructs a cinematic literacy narrative, one that shows the deleterious role that school-based literacy events played in one adolescent boy's failure at school and his eventual abandonment by his parents and incarceration in a delinquent center (see Trier, 2007, for a discussion of this project).

In another project, I used the school film *The Paper Chase* as a case study of how relations of power, though potentially negative, also have positive effects (Trier, 2003). These are merely two examples of many in which I have conceptualized a school film as a case study that makes a theoretical claim.

My overall recommendation to teacher educators, though, is to open up to the idea that fictional texts can become either case studies in their entirety or can become the source material for designing cases from the whole texts. Teacher educators who open themselves to this possibility will discover that there exists a treasure trove of texts readily and easily available, just waiting to be taken up in pedagogical case study projects.

Notes

[1] With its general focus on a popular culture representation of education, this article also contributes to the existent literature that explores such popular representations—i.e., representations of teachers, students, principals, and "schooling" in general. Within this literature are books and book chapters that analyze what can be called the "school film" genre, such as Considine's (1985) *The Cinema of Adolescence*, Reed's (1989) "Let's Burn the High School," Farber, Provenzo, Jr., and Holms's (1994) *Schooling in the Light of Popular Culture*, Shary's (2002) *Generation Multiplex*, Dalton's (2004) *The Hollywood Curriculum*, and Bulman's (2005) *Hollywood Goes to High School*. Also within this literature are ideological analyses of representations of teacher saviors, such as Ayers's (1994) critique of the entire subgenre of the teacher savior film, Giroux's critiques of the pedagogy of Miss Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* and Mr. Keating in *Dead Poets Society* (in Giroux, 2002), and Banks and Esposito's (2002) critique of educators in the television series *Boston Public*. Another vein in this literature is made up of articles and book chapters by academics who discuss how they have incorporated school films as texts to engage preservice teachers in a variety of critical projects (for example, Robertson, 1995 and 1997; Weber and Mitchell, 1995; Paul, 2001; Freedman and Easley II, 2004; and Trier, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2010). It is important to point out, though, that none of the above-cited works involve taking up a popular representation of teachers, students and "schooling" as source material for designing case studies. So within this literature, this article is arguably a new way to think about and pedagogically engage with such representations.

[2] *Boston Public* is intermittently rerun on the Women's Entertainment (WE) channel in the U.S., and I have seen it rerun on Canadian television (a discovery I made while attending the American Educational Research Association annual meeting in Montreal in 2005). All 81 episodes are regularly on auction on eBay or available through various venders accessible via the Internet. (When the series originally aired, I videotaped all the episodes, but I now own a DVD box set, purchased on the Internet.)

[3] The class that Danny is teaching is comprised of an equal number of Black and White students, and the questions raised by the students and Danny, as well as their arguments and answers to the questions that occur (throughout the whole case), are clearly intended to seem very powerful and to lead the television viewer through a seemingly reasoned, in-depth discussion of the issue.

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