THE CASE METHOD: AN APPROACH TO TEACHING AND LEARNING IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION PROGRAMMES

PART I

The Place of the Case Method in Teaching and Learning in Educational Administration Programmes.

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Introduction

One of the critical issues in the professional preparation and development of administrators at all levels of the education system is that of devising instructional strategies and techniques based on an integration of theory, research and existing practice.

This paper examines the viability of the case method as a teaching/learning strategy in instructional systems geared toward the training of personnel who administer the various areas of the education system. The core argument in this presentation is that the case method provides the curriculum developer and/or trainer with a real opportunity to help the learner to become oriented towards administrative decision-making during the instructional process. This is possible in so far as its use facilitates the development of educational praxis - that is, the use of relevant theory for problem posing, reflexive thinking and informed practice. The following limerick highlights these essential purposes of the case as an instructional tool:

A student of administration with tact
Absorbed many answers he lacked
But acquiring a job,
He said with a sob,
"How does one fit answer to fact"
(adapted from Gragg 1954, p 11)

Essentials of the Case Method

The case method is in essence a teaching strategy which emphasizes the use of learning activities that are participatory in nature and are oriented toward decision-making and problem-solving. An essential element of this method of teaching and learning is the use of a case. Lawrence (1953, p 215) defines a case as a vehicle by which an empirically derived record of some aspect of organizational reality is brought into the classroom or training laboratory. This reality is usually an account of an actual administrative situation which is problematic in nature and therefore requires for its resolution the application of the skills of managerial/administra-
tive decision-making. It is important to note that the decision-making exercise may be presented in several ways. For example, the case may be one in which both the problem and solution have been given and the task is one of assessing how worthwhile the particular solution is. There are also those cases in which the problem has been stated and a solution has to be worked out. Additionally, a fairly complex case usually requires the analyst to engage in both problem identification and resolution.

When using this method, both instructors and learners need to accept the joint responsibility for providing an in-depth analysis and explanation of the major issues imbedded in the case. Following upon this, the key task is to make situationally relevant decisions in the light of knowledge and experience on the course of action to be taken for the resolution of the problem.

Characteristic Features of a Case

As a description of some organizational happening, a case may have two (2) major types of information. These consist of data on the core and related problems as well as contextual information. The latter includes:

(a) pertinent aspects of the history of the organization;

(b) intra and extra- organizational forces affecting the organization;

(c) current operational data;

(d) biographical data on the key actors in the situation over time;

(e) structural features of the organization including insights on the design and control systems; and

(f) any other type of information which would clearly throw light on the problematic situation under review.

The core and/or related problems focus specifically on some structural or behavioural problem which the administrator is expected to resolve, or having so resolved is expected to justify. It is usually pertinent to the ongoing tasks of integrating the managerial functions which include planning, organizing, staffing, budgeting, co-ordination and control. These processes are geared toward effective task/performance management while at the same time satisfying the
needs of organizational members. These efforts at goal attainment usually require adaptability in situations of contingencies. The issues for case analysis in the area of organizational behaviour mainly highlight the theoretical constructs related to perspectives on management, organizational goal setting and design; leadership; personality factors; interpersonal/group influences, motivation and organizational development and change, as these pertain to the various areas of educational administration at both the system and school levels.

There are several other salient features of the case. For example, it must be a reliably documented account of a real situation that occurred within the organizational setting. Doriswami and Towl (1963, p 293) in emphasizing the need for empiricism as a feature of authentic case writing noted that

It is useful to think of a case as a connecting link which draws together the experience of the executive (administrator) on the job; the executives (and potential executives) in management development programmes; and the researcher in his (or her) efforts to understand the process of management. The written cases are catalysts to speed the process of learning from experience.

This striving for authenticity in case writing can facilitate the process by which curriculum developers and course instructors in the various pre- and in-service training programmes in educational administration are able to pursue the desired path of teaching and learning, using the pedagogical approach of reflection, relevant theorizing, and appropriate action and review. The report on administrative practice as conveyed through the various cases can be evaluated in a clinical way through the use of 'disciplined knowledge' from the field of academia. The use of 'non-disciplined knowledge' or practical experience gained from day-to-day organizational life is also very desirable.

Another characteristic feature of the case is the systematic efforts at withholding (whenever necessary) the identity of both the organization under review as well as the key actors in the situation. The use of disguise by the case writer is intended to increase the level of confidentiality in reporting on the part of the respondent. As a consequence, the objectivity and therefore reliability of the finding may be better ensured. (Erskine, Leenders, Mauffette-Leenders 1981, pp 10-26).
The Use of the Case Method in Educational Administration Programs

Curricular Justification

Any commitment to the use of praxis in the case method as an instructional tool ought to take into consideration the following curricular issues:

(a) the target group receiving instruction;
(b) the curriculum philosophy;
(c) curriculum content and programme design;
(d) instructional aims and objectives;
(e) resource preferences and availability;
(f) the perspective(s) on instructional methodology; and
(g) the mode of evaluation and appraisal.

Whether or not the use of the case method can be justified would depend on the resolution of issues pertaining to (a) to (g). This in turn depends on the perspective on education, training and curriculum development adopted by the given educational institution, and its specific departments of academic learning and/or professional preparation.

Schwab (1973, pp 501-522) advanced the view that the choice of curriculum practices in any educational programme is usually influenced by the following factors:

(a) the characteristics of the wider societal environment and specific education milieu;
(b) the structure of the discipline;
(c) the characteristics of the learners; and
(d) the value orientations of the teaching personnel.

In respect of (a) to (d) two (2) central issues are often raised when trying to justify the use of the case method as an appropriate instructional device. What is the nature and purpose of educational administration and who benefits from educational administration programmes within a particular educational environment?
Hoy and Miskel (1982, p 27) have noted that a basic problem in educational administration is that it is a relatively new field of academic endeavour and professional preparation. In fact, it is only in the twentieth century that it has received the status of a separate discipline and a systematic field of study. It is in effect, an applied discipline and a systematic field of study. It is in effect, an applied discipline dependent for its perspectives, concepts and theory on the other social sciences such as sociology, psychology, economics and political science. In supporting the view that educational administration is best viewed in professional terms as an applied discipline (Hills, 1978, p 2) notes:

In the sharpest possible contrast to the purely academic professions, the paramount feature of applied professions is the primacy of their orientation to a clinical focus. In addition to acting as custodians of specialized bodies of knowledge, the applied professions also act as trustees of categories of practical interests, and needs of society and its members (for example, maintenance of health; the settlement of legal disputes, the effective organization of educational process).

The practical problems listed above have emerged in the field of medicine, law and now education. The case as an authentic account of a significant organizational event can effectively highlight problematic educational issues, and the 'disciplined knowledge' from the social sciences and the humanities can then be used to provide meaningful understanding and explanations. Note that the explanatory power of practical experience should not be down-played.

While there has evolved a fairly widespread consensus on the nature of educational administration as an applied discipline, there are academics in the field who warn against an over-emphasis on the practical at the expense of much needed theory building and academic research as valid pursuits per se. Hill (1978, p 3) again seeks to allay this fear when he stresses that academic pursuits are in themselves legitimate, yet given the nature of educational administration as an applied discipline, the instrumental use of academic knowledge takes preeminence.

While no less concerned with the maintenance, transmission and extension of knowledge than are the academic professions, the applied professions also assume responsibility for managing on-going practical processes and for seeking and implementing solutions to concrete,
practical problems. Their ultimate focus is not the pursuit of knowledge itself, but the effective attainment of practical goals where serious interests of clients are often at stake.

It has become evident that, how curriculum developers and instructional leaders within the university setting or agency-based training institutions organize programmes of learning in educational administration is congruent with their dominant conception of the nature of the discipline.

It is suggested in this paper that the 'practitioner oriented' approach to developing teaching methodologies in educational administration is consistent with the nature of the discipline as an applied profession. Consequently, in view of the nature of the discipline and the predominant environment demands on trained educational administrators to demonstrate effective problem posing and problem-solving competencies, the case and its related teaching and learning activities can justifiably be used as a viable instrument of instruction.

The Case Method and the Student of Educational Administration

In principle, the case method is essentially a participatory mode of teaching and learning. Its usefulness has been legitimated so far by considerations related to:-

(a) the nature of educational administration as a discipline;

(b) the predominant demands of the society for educational change; and

(c) the curriculum philosophy of course instructors.

This methodology can be further defended on the ground that it is an enlightened approach to instruction given the characteristics of the students as adult learners. It is important to note that training in educational administration is essentially a process of adult education. In this regard, the characteristics of the learners must be duly considered.

Overstreet (1949, p 43) identified some of the attributes of the successful adult learner. These include autonomy rationalism; objectivity; deep concerns; tolerance for ambiguity; originality; a problem-solving orientation and integrated self-identity. Knowles (1977, p 24) urged that in the face of these attributes of the learner, the mission of the adult educator (and the instructional leader in educational administration is certainly one) is to provide the
learning environment in which the students can realize their intellectual and academic potentials. The graduate can then be in a position to respond meaningfully to the imperatives of educational change within the educational system.

Teaching with the Case Method: Some Practical Concerns

Goals and Purposes

Notwithstanding the fact that the case method embraces a variety set of pedagogic practice, the use of case remains the central teaching tool in this methodology. Frantzve (1983, p 4) is supportive of the view advanced in this presentation that cases used in pre-service university courses allow students to experience vicariously a variety of managerial/administrative situations before the actual plunge into the 'trenches' of routine organizational life. In the in-service programmes run by agency-based training institutions for example, training units in Ministries of Education, the use of cases may allow for reflexive thinking on existing practice. The analysis of situations reported in cases provides the learner with the opportunity to engage in:-

(a) decision-making under time pressure;

(b) an assessment of fragmented information, with the ultimate obligation to react responsibly in the problem-atic situation under review;

(c) risk taking;

(d) uncertainty; and

(e) decision-making for remedial action after some performance appraisal.

The use of cases allows the student to apply concepts, theories and techniques to resolve different types of educational problems which have actually occurred.

In contrast, there is a relative degree of passivity which characterizes the relationship between teacher and learner when the traditional lecture method is used. The range of intellectual processing from knowledge and understanding to analysis, synthesis and evaluation - is usually left up to the learner at the tertiary level of education. The opportunity for the instructor to intervene directly and consistently in monitoring how students gain these intellectual/academic skills becomes somewhat limited. Essentially, this activity remains the responsibility of the learner.
Additionally, the moment is delayed when the learner engages in reflexive behaviour, that is, matching reflection to theory as the basis of informed practice. This has often led to the complaint that graduates in administration programmes are "too theoretical"; and are generally unable to move with certainty toward the resolution of educational problems both at the levels of policy formulation, on-going implementation, and review.

Dooley and Skinner (1977, pp 277-289) and Frantzve (1983 p 5) advanced the view that the case as a teaching tool helps the student to learn on several levels:

(a) Individual analysis through case analysis reports will force the application of theories and techniques of problem-solving.

(b) Class discussions help the student to hear and respond to other points of view.

(c) A presentation and defence of one's own analysis assist in developing an in-depth probing of the case. Hence, synthesis and evaluative skills are required.

The distinguishing characteristic of this participatory approach to teaching and learning is the extent to which the analytical sifting of pros and cons and arriving at a definite decision (however incomplete the information provided) is taken by the student. (McNair 1954, p viii). One of the central objectives of this type of classroom methodology is to help students to value the importance of the transfer of learning from the academic setting to the arena of the task and wider educational environment.

Components of a Case: Focus on Substantive Content

There are two (2) major dimensions of a case: they are the literary layout as well as the substantive content of the situation under review. The latter is organized around:

(1) the core and/or related problems which may be essentially structural or behavioural in nature; and

(2) the contextual/background information in which the problems are embedded.
The substantive content of the case is determined by the educational aims and the needs of the specific group of learners. For example, University based programmes in educational administration usually cater for the development of supervisory, and senior technical and administrative staff at all levels of the education system. Fayol (1939) identified some of the major areas to be administered. These include: the technical tasks (curriculum); financial/accounting; marketing (including public relations); security; and the managerial (with a focus on staff and student development) (See Appendix I).

Case analysis of organizational behaviour at the various administrative levels of the educational system would centre therefore on the typical kinds of decisions which administrator at Head Office, Educational Centres and schools are expected to make. These decisions are related to the following questions:

(i) What is the mission of this school, given the role of education in the society and the needs of students?

(ii) How do senior technical and administrative officials at the level of the state, the Education Ministry and/or Board of Education and the school go about running the system school on a routine basis?

(iii) As educational administrators, is there a dominant educational and management philosophy which informs the kinds of goals that are set and the actual process of decision-making during implementation?

(iv) What are the mechanisms for devolving authority and responsibility as well as determining accountability?

(v) What are the mechanisms for ensuring discipline behaviour among student and staff and how are conflict and tension managed?

(vi) What is the strategic perspective on leadership style, motivation and productivity?

(vii) How are educational resources acquired and utilized?

(viii) How does the school and its headquarters agencies interface with the various 'publics'?

(ix) What are the strategic responses to crisis situations related to reduced funding; student interest; and industrial disputes?

(x) How are organizational development and change issues handled?
Cases are developed mainly around the issues raised in (i) to (x) and the terminal objectives for the course in educational administration (which centres on organizational behaviour and performance) need to:

(1) identify and explain the main management tasks faced by the leadership of large and small scale educational institutions;

(2) determine the contribution of theory and research in the area of organizational behaviour to the resolution of given school management problems; and

(3) adopt the position of decision-maker and/or problem solver in a variety of situations in which management problems exist.

(see Appendix 2 for the key issues in Educational Administration)

Literary Layout: The Case Plan

Leenders and Erskine (1978, p 42) in alluding to the problems of the layout of a case raised the following questions: What information should a case contain? How much information should be included? What should be excluded? And where should the case end? Perhaps a generalized response to these questions is that it depends on the theoretical focus and the practical purpose of the case as a teaching tool. For example, there is need to effect a meaningful balance between the core and contextual information in the case. A major criterion for so doing is the decision-making responsibility that the student is expected to assume: decision-making under time pressure is a situation of fragmented information; risk taking and uncertainty or remedial action after the problematic event. In addition, there is need to consider the theoretical issues to be raised.

In respect of the pertinent concepts, theory and data to be used in the case analysis, Leenders and Erskine (1978, pp 127-130) refer to the efforts of Professor Frank Folls from Harvard to resolve the academic issues of the kind of analytical task(s) that the student is expected to undertake when doing a case analysis. The emergent issue here as seen by these researchers is the level of conceptual difficulty that characterises the case. Three (3) dimensions of difficulty have been identified. These are:
(a) the analytical dimension - this involves either evaluating the match between the problem and the given solution; requesting a viable solution to a given problem or asking the student to identify both the problem and solution to a described situation;

(2) the conceptual dimension - this requires the student to discern the complex of concepts and/or theories which can illuminate and explain the analytical issues in the case; and

(3) the presentation dimension - this is the contextual realm of (a) and (b) in so far as the case writer makes a decision on the type and scope of background information in which the case problems are embedded. This includes organizational history, personal biographies, environmental forces and current operational data.

In respect of (a) the case outline is structured to include opening paragraphs which usually have either a direct or oblique reference to the conceptual/analytical problem or issue. Some effort is also made to highlight information related to the identity of the decision-maker and the frame of the case. Is it, for example, written at the time when the problem has not yet been identified; at the stage of critical investigation; the decision/implementation phase; the evaluation phase or at a time when the problem has already been resolved? (University of Western Ontario Case Writing Workshop, April 1985). Additionally, the environmental context in which the case event is taking place must be described. The flash-back technique may be used to present this type of data.

The body of the case is usually an elaboration of the data provided in the opening paragraphs. Depending on the nature of the analytical task and the degree of conceptual difficulties, enough information must be provided to allow for a meaningful decision to be made. It is to be noted that three (3) criteria for determining the adequacy of the data are:

(a) the type of decision to be made and the circumstances thereto;

(b) the time frame involved; and

(c) the pertinence of the facts and figures; biographical data; opinions; and the environmental profiles.

It is important that attention be paid to the adequacy of the case data so that there could be a minimum of speculation as to the nature of the problem and the most viable option for its resolution.
Conclusion

In this presentation, a rationale and explanation of the case method have been given. It has been stressed that the actual case plan must contain data that have been derived empirically. Also, such data must be categorized into the substantive (directly germane to the problem to be resolved) and contextual.

The utility of this method in the development of educational praxis has been established, particularly in the context of educational administration as an applied discipline. In a follow-up paper, a description of a teaching plan for case analysis will be provided. This includes a detailed set of teaching notes which will guide the case analyst in the process of reflexive thinking and informed decision-making.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX I

FRAMEWORK FOR CASE WRITING AND ANALYSIS

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<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
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<td>Perspectives on Management</td>
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<td>Group and inter-personal influence</td>
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<td>Organizational Design (including job design)</td>
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<td>Organizational processes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizational development innovation and change</td>
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KEY

1. **Areas of Educational Administration**
   1.1 Curriculum
   1.2 Personnel
   1.3 Student Development
   1.4 Institution/Head Office Relations
   1.5 Facility Management
   1.6 Financial, Records, Office Management
   1.7 Links with other Educational Institutions
   1.8 Links with the Community

2. **Major Functions of the Administrator**
   - **Pre-Operational**
     2.1 Planning
     2.2 Organizing including budgeting and staffing
   - **Operational**
     2.3 Co-ordinating
     2.4 Directing
     2.5 Commanding
     2.6 Controlling
   - **Post-Operational**
     2.7 Reporting
     2.8 Evaluating

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APPENDIX 2

KEY THEORETICAL ISSUES IN ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOUR IN THE EDUCATIONAL SETTING

(1) Alienation - Teacher Burnout
(2) Career Development - Professional Advancement
(3) Centralization/Decentralization - Departmentation
(4) Collective Bargaining - Union Negotiations
(5) Communication
(6) Conflict Resolution - Disciplinary Procedures
(7) Crisis Management - Ad Hocacy versus Contingency Planning.
(8) Employee Relations - Teacher/Principal Relations; Staff Relations.
(9) Group Behaviour - Teacher/Pupil Interaction; Office/Staff Relations.
(10) Goal setting - Educational Aims and System Objectives
(11) Perception/Personality
(12) Job Satisfaction
(13) Job Enrichment - Staff Deployment/Staff Development
(14) Leadership - Head Office/School Classroom Leadership
(15) Management Philosophy - Nature and Purpose of Education
(16) Management of Change - Curriculum Innovation
(17) Matrix Organization - Use of Committees
(18) Motivation - Teacher Expectations
(19) Morale - School Climate
(20) Organizational Development - Educational/Institutional Change.
(21) Organizational Structure - The School as a Bureaucracy.
(22) Personal Development - Teaching and Professional Renewal
(23) Reorganization/Restructuring.
(24) Supervision.
(25) Strategic Planning - Educational Planning.