

Classroom Casebooks

Teaching provides few opportunities to record and preserve a particular teacher's accumulated knowledge. Through casebooks teachers can leave a legacy of practice to colleagues.

JUDITH H. SHULMAN

For the past few years, the Far West Laboratory has been working with groups of teachers to write and develop thematic Close-to-the-Classroom Casebooks. As the staff

of a regional educational laboratory whose mission is to link the research community with practice, we wanted to provide opportunities for teachers to render accounts of their work as contri-

butions to the literature on teaching.

We felt that cases were a promising way to infuse reality and concreteness into theory-laden courses of teacher preparation and staff development. In retrospect, this was a modest aspiration. In the five years since we began, we have learned that this type of writing can profoundly affect the authors (Shulman and Colbert 1987, 1988; Shulman and Mesa-Bains 1990). This is particularly true in collaborative settings, where teachers and researchers can deliberate, ask clarifying questions,

ONE STRUGGLE AFTER ANOTHER

Excerpts from a Case Story

The following excerpts from a case and its commentaries show how a case can be instructive to both case writers and case readers.¹

Prologue:

Vickie White, a first-year intern teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District, had requested an assignment to a predominantly black high school. Her only other teaching experience had been teaching composition to entering UCLA freshmen.

But she had felt confident about taking on this class of 9th and 10th graders because she knew what it was like to be a poor black youngster growing up in Los Angeles.²

Vickie White's case study:

Since I began teaching, my English 9B classes have been one struggle after the next. Not only do all of my students have distinct personalities, but they have a variety of skill levels as well. When I announced we would be reading *Romeo and Juliet*, some students—mostly girls—rejoiced at the prospect. Others groaned, "Why?" It was more a plea than a question. "Because," was my response, "*Romeo and Juliet* is required reading for all 9th graders as stated in the curriculum guide."

Meaningless. They didn't buy it. That was my first mistake. I had not really thought about why I was teaching the play. I only knew that I was going to teach it because the guide said so, and I had not anticipated that the majority of my students would

want to know why.

Before we began the actual reading, I had prepared a lesson to help acquaint students with the language, knowing that they would have difficulty with it. But again, my lesson, my entire plan, was not thorough enough; it just didn't penetrate. Their preconceived notions about the play came mostly from *The Little Rascals* and *The Three Stooges*. I had not anticipated how misguided most of them were about everything in the play.

After two days of preparation, we were "ready" to read on Wednesday. I assigned parts, picking my strongest readers for the long pieces. All of the students had difficulty. I had planned to have them reread Act I, Scene 1, at home and write a brief plot summary. But they were not ready, and my assignment only made the play repulsive to them.

Something needed to be done, but I felt quite at a loss. I decided to try one more thing. I told them I would have some friends over on the weekend, and we would make a cassette of the play so they could hear how it should sound.

and brainstorm what can be learned from the case. Perhaps more important, however, the resulting narratives can become tools that inform and educate new and experienced teachers (Shulman in press; Atkin 1991; Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1990).

Snapshots of Classroom Life

The cases that we publish are candid, dramatic, highly readable accounts of teaching episodes or series of events. They offer a snapshot of an on-the-job dilemma, complete with the author's thoughts and feelings. They are consciously designed to provoke analysis and discussion. More than just narratives, they are "teaching cases," stories of classroom life that represent recurring challenges for teachers.¹

Asking, "What is this a case of?" we

work together with teacher-authors to craft their subjective experiences into teaching cases. By developing a shared sense of what this case has taught the writer and could potentially teach others, we identify the details of the story that may be critical for understanding its meaning and those that are irrelevant. We can also see where the teachers' own emotional responses need to be explored more fully.

Our cases have two components: a narrative by a teacher-author and at least two commentaries by educators representing different points of view (for example, new and experienced teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and educational scholars). Commentaries aren't meant to answer questions raised in the text but, rather, to enrich the analysis of each case by adding multiple interpretations. Each

commentary adds an important perspective to the "conversations" that follow each case.

Teacher-authored cases can educate not only the case writer but also the case reader. While critics of teacher education and staff development often charge that teachers do not reflect on and learn from their experience, the ordinary school setting does not lend itself to such reflection. Too much is happening too swiftly in the messy world of practice for teachers to think deeply about what they are doing. Our experience working with several groups of teachers suggests that case writing and case-based teaching can foster such reflection.

A Tool for Reflection

The degree to which case writing influ-

On Sunday, two friends showed up, and we spend the entire afternoon reading a very long play with over 20 parts.

On Monday, I passed out the texts so that the students could follow the words as they were being read on cassette. When the play began, the students (in all classes) gave me strange looks. One asked, "Are your friends white?" I nodded. Because I am black (and so are 97 percent of my students), I suppose they expected to hear black people reading. As the tape continued, they would pinch their noses, indicating that one of my friends had a nasal voice. It was time to seek help.

My mentor teacher in the English department, who, coincidentally, teaches the Shakespeare elective, suggested that I not play the tape for them anymore, assuring me that if we read only four lines it would be okay, as long as the students were following along and trying. Eventually they would get it.

I also sought advice from my English department chair, who suggested that I be more careful in my preliminary exercises. He shared some

lessons that he uses to help students deal with the language. I recognized, upon seeing them, that they would have helped. He also suggested that I not give reading homework early on. His experience was that students get frustrated, exactly as I had witnessed, and give up.

I still feel that I ruined the atmosphere for the play, early on, and that my students will never be very enthused about finishing it. The next time we begin a difficult unit, though, I will not hesitate to seek help, during the early planning stages, to avoid unhappy circumstances later on.

Joel Littauer, experienced teacher, reacts:

If Vickie can find parallel themes in a Three Stooges comedy and a tragedy by Shakespeare, then the comedy could be used as an introduction to the tragedy. Given a recognizable vehicle into the play under study, students will find Shakespeare less alien, less fearsome, and the analogy will aid them in understanding what is meant by

theme, if theme is what Vickie is stressing.

The same principle holds true when working within any genre of literature. The teacher must ask, "What am I teaching?" The answer is never the name of the play, poem, novel or short story but, rather, a composition skill, a principle of literary criticism, or recognition of a facet of the human condition. The literature is simply the vehicle into that instruction.

Lee Shulman, Stanford University Professor, reacts:

What makes this case so tragic, in its own way, is both its inevitability and avoidability. We know that nearly every teacher of English will teach *Romeo and Juliet* or *Julius Caesar* or *Hamlet* or all three during the first few years of teaching. We know that nearly all 9th or 10th grade youngsters will find the prospect of reading those plays distressing.

Would we send astronauts into space without equipment for coping with

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ences meaningful reflection may depend on the degree of commitment teachers and researchers can invest in the writing process. Our program combines extensive individual feedback on successive drafts of cases. This collaborative process begins at our first meeting with teachers, when we present guidelines for writing cases, including a set of writing prompts and perhaps a sample case.² After we jointly brainstorm possible topics, the teachers write and share cases with one another.

Our joint reflective inquiry generally begins after the authors complete their first draft. This is when we provide feedback, in writing and orally, on issues that need clarification. We also plan meetings for the contributors to present their cases to one another. Often we distribute successive drafts to the contributors so they can raise ques-

Our cases have two components: a narrative by a teacher-author and at least two commentaries by educators representing different points of view.

tions and make suggestions based on the written texts as well as oral presentations. In response, sometimes teachers

write multiple drafts. An unanticipated outcome of this process is an increase in the commitment that teachers feel toward one another.

Personal Stories of Teaching

It is often fascinating to watch how the narratives evolve into "teaching cases." At the beginning, we are often unclear just what these are cases "of!" Writing becomes the reflective part of the experience, which involves much more than simple recall of events. Teachers and their collaborators must reconstruct and interpret their experiences and understandings. In the process, new perceptions often emerge.

The wisdom of practice can find its voice. Through disciplined, collaborative case writing, personal stories of teaching can foster individual reflection,

weightlessness or airlessness? When we can be certain that a new teacher will encounter a particularly difficult problem, how can we send him or her into the classroom without appropriate materials and orientation? Teaching Shakespeare to youngsters of varying skill and interest levels requires knowledge of content-specific pedagogy. Knowing how to get the kids quiet is important. Knowing how to keep them on-task is indispensable. But once they are quiet and attentive, there had better be a meaningful task, meaningfully presented, for them to address. If not, that well-managed classroom is going to break down quickly, as Vickie so painfully discovered.

Epilogue:

Several months later, I asked Vickie and other teacher-authors to examine the impact of this project on them as professional teachers. Vickie wrote the following:

Before [this project] I hadn't stopped to truly evaluate my

teaching. The writing project gave me an opportunity to do just that. When I wrote that I told my class that we were going to read [a play] "because the curriculum guide said so," I was startled. I said it, but my postrealization was especially shocking. It made me aware that sometimes the classroom context is a place completely isolated from other customs and norms. Outside of the classroom, I could not envision myself saying something like that and expecting my students not to question me.

Linda Dmytriw, a novice junior high English teacher, reflected on her experience as a case writer, and explored her reaction to reading Vickie's case:

... I was surprised to find that I had faced similar experiences [as Vickie], but with a different [Hispanic] student population. Reading Vickie's evaluation of her own Shakespeare lesson will—I am sure—benefit me at a later date. Vickie's case writing necessi-

tates reflection throughout the process, and is, in fact, a discovery of its own. I think this discovery is for both the writer and the reader. I can see how the complete package—the case with its commentaries—will better enable me to reflect on how I can meet the needs and skill levels of my students so that they can experience an aesthetic enjoyment of whatever literary work we study in the future (Shulman et al. 1990). □

¹Vickie White's case and the commentaries following it are excerpted from: J. H. Shulman and A. Colbert, eds., (1988), *The Intern Teacher Casebook*, (San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development).

²The first college graduate in her family and one of the few from her south-central Los Angeles neighborhood, Vickie White earned a bachelor's and a master's degree at UCLA. Later, she worked there with the affirmative action program, the Academic Advancement Program, and the Black Student Alliance.

—Judith H. Shulman

provide opportunities for professional dialogue and conversation, and enlighten future generations of teachers. □

¹This definition of a teaching case applies only to the cases that I develop. A range of cases are currently being published, from the 50-page teacher-authored cases developed by Judith Kleinfeld at the Center for Cross-Cultural Education, University of Alaska at Fairbanks, to the decision-making/problem-solving cases without solutions developed by Rita Silverman, William Welty, and S. Lyon (in press). Though cases with commentaries are common in other professions (medicine, ethics, law), to my knowledge, they are rare in education.

²For examples of guidelines, see *The Intern Teacher Casebook* (Shulman and Colbert 1988) and *Teaching Diverse Students: Cases and Commentaries*

(Shulman and Mesa-Bains 1990). See also Shulman (in press) for more extensive descriptions of case writing.

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