CASE WRITING AS EVIDENCE OF GOOD PRACTICE IN THE VEGPSP

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What is a Case?

Cases are richly detailed narratives of teaching that are used to (a) guide personal reflection on our teaching of /about values (b) inform others about issues we are encountering in values education and how they might be approached and (c) structure professional learning within and across clusters in the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project. Although they are ‘story-like’, cases are not simply stories that teachers tell about their work. They are crafted into compelling narratives, with a beginning, middle and end, and situated in an event or series of events that unfold over time. They have a plot that is problem-focused with some dramatic tension that must be relieved. They are embedded with many problems that can be framed and analysed from various perspectives, and they include the thoughts and feelings of the teacher-writers as they describe the accounts. Some case writers describe problems that remain unresolved and end their stories with a series of questions about what to do. Others include solutions that may or may not have worked. They all include reflective comments about their accounts that examine what they have learned from the experience and/or what they may do differently in another similar situation. These comments should include the author’s answer to the question, ‘What is this a case of?’ The specific challenges, solutions and experiences of a single case should be related to general issues and principles of learning and teaching so that as a professional community develops its body of cases, it is also developing a more articulate understanding of the general principles of its practice.

What are the Cases About?

In the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project, the cases will focus on the teaching and learning of values. They will seek to understand what aspects of teaching, of classroom arrangements, and of the broader environment contribute to what students do and do not learn in values education programs.

Each case should centre on a lesson or series of lessons and address a central concept, skill, attitude, or aspect of participation associated with teaching and learning about values. They should be written by teachers actively engaged in values education programs.

The substance of the case should discuss:

- the context of the classroom (relevant aspects of the course, student population and school);
- the intentions for student learning, ie learning aims (including aspects of students knowing and learning associated with the development of skills, conceptual understanding and participation);
• an account of the learning problem being addressed, including hypotheses about what the students knew and knew how to do (ie what the teachers felt they could build upon), as well as concerns about what students did not yet know or know how to do;
• what happened to the teacher and the students in the course of the teaching event or process, what resources supported the activities, and how the teacher organised and directed the students activities;
• what the activities required in terms of student participation, understanding, and skills;
• what problems, dilemmas, questions, or puzzles the teacher encountered;
• what occurred as a result of the teacher’s efforts – both intended and unintended consequences, including evidence about student learning.

Three components comprise a case report: (a) the case narrative, (b) the case analysis, and (c) a commentary by a colleague.

**The Case Narrative (2–3 pages)**

Although there is no single formula, all case narratives will have some components in common:

**Plot** – Cases should have a plot. The plot often follows a pattern like the following: You plan to teach a particular concept or set of skills to a group of students in a specific setting. This sets a problem for you and your students. Your intentions include a rationale for teaching these ideas and a discussion of what you expected students to learn, an intended scenario for how the lessons and learning will unfold. When you teach, things don't usually go quite as planned. Either students don't respond as you expected, or some respond in different ways than others, or they know more or different things than you predicted, or unexpected blessings or glitches arise. This requires that you adapt to the surprises or otherwise make sense of the events. You may then want to report on how the modifications went or simply on how you interpret what occurred – your sense of why things unfolded as they did.

**Context** – Cases are situated in specific locations and at a specific point in time. Describe the particulars in the context. Tell us about the school, the community, the students, the history of the class, whatever details are relevant to help your reader understand the situation.

**Problem** — Embedded in any act of teaching is a learning problem. The problem for your students comes from their need to know, or know how to do, something that they do not already know or know how to do. The problem for you includes deciding on a set of goals or a standard that you will strive with your students for them to meet, deciding on how you and your students will know whether and how they are meeting these goals, and designing learning activities and resources for your students through which they can accomplish what you hope they will. In this case, the problem is your sense of what students needed to learn and the questions you had about how to teach these things to them.

**Analysis of the content and learning goals** – Because your case is one of learning and teaching in the values education domain you should include an analysis of the ‘content’ from the *National Framework* you want to address in the lesson/s and what you want the students to learn and learn to do, including ways that you want your students to participate in the learning activity and how you want them to learn to
participate. Provide a rationale for why you wanted to teach this content, these skills and concepts, and these aspects of participation to this particular group of students at this point in time. Describe your intentions, your anticipations, your expectations. These typically flow from your rationale. What were you hoping to accomplish? What did you expect would happen in terms of how students would engage in and learn from the activities you planned? What reactions from your students did you anticipate and prepare for?

**What happened** – Bring your readers into your classroom and help them vicariously experience the unfolding events and the questions or dilemmas you struggled with. In developing the sequence of interactions you might include, not necessarily in this order, your first encounters, moments of tension, how you responded, how the students responded, and what the result was.

**Evidence of what students learned** – You may discuss what happened in many ways – how you perceived what happened, how you felt about the process, how students were engaged, and how students seemed to feel – but you must include some evidence about what students actually learned in relation to your intentions. You can frame this discussion using samples of student work or assessment results (tests, papers, projects, exhibitions or other products); your own observations of their learning before, during, or after this teaching event; or students’ reports about their own learning. You may also find that students’ learned some things different from or beyond what you intended. This would be equally useful to note. Be sure to describe the variability in student learning outcomes (who learned what) as well as the norm.

**Case Analysis (1 page)**

The case analysis may comprise a separate section or it may be woven throughout the case. A reflection will generally be found at the end of the case. The analysis should include:

**Discussion of why events unfolded as they did** – How do you make sense of what happened, based on what we know about things like participation, engagement, motivation, and learning? Consider both positive and negative outcomes and both intended and unintended consequences. Where possible your analysis should cite any relevant research as well as your own well-reasoned opinions. Discussions between the case writer and the UAN colleague might well give rise to the research aspect of the commentary. You may find that other cases contribute to your understanding as well.

**Your reflection on the event** – How has this case affected how you think about students and their learning? About the content? What lessons do you take from this case for the future, both for teaching this topic and others in your subject matter? What is your answer to the question ‘What is this a case of?’ What general principles of learning and teaching does your case illustrate? And what should another teacher understand about your experience to make use of what you learned?

**Commentary (1 page)**

A commentary might be written by a fellow teacher, a teacher educator UAN colleague, a parent, or a student. Commentaries are relatively brief responses to a case that provide additional perspectives on what happened and why. The commentary is an opportunity to deepen dialogue, to raise additional insights or hypotheses, and to bring additional perspectives, experiences, or research to bear. One of its major
purposes is to provide objectivity to the case and provide testimony to it as evidence of what actually occurred.

An Example of a Case

**TAKING A BREAK IN GRADE ONE**

*Jo Osler*

"Luke and Phillip, now is not the time for rolling around on the floor ... Lauren and Venessa you'll have to keep your voices down, you're disturbing the rest of the students at your table. ...Take those scissors out of the fish tank and get back to your work ... Stop fighting over the pencil sharpeners, you'll all get a go!"

Several weeks later, changes have taken place! Now Luke looks quietly out the window, while Phillip rests in the bean bag. Lauren and Venessa hold their discussion down on the floor, some distance away from the group working at the table.

Looking back I can recall the session which encouraged me to broaden my understanding of the decisions students need to make independently to ensure that their learning is more effective.

It was one of those sessions where I was going to sit back and observe my grade one students. We had just finished reading *The Owl Who Was Afraid of the Dark*. Students had various activities to complete related to the book. The activities encourage students to link prior knowledge with the new learning and provide a variety of ways to use knowledge. Firstly, there was the Semantic Map¹ on owls, there was a Venn Diagram² on the differences and similarities of night and day, a Fact File³ on owls had to be completed, as well as filling in their Thought Balloons⁴. It was a full day!

I presented the sequence of activities in the morning and students could work through them at their own pace. The students knew that they could approach me with questions about the tasks and that I would have discussion on the floor if they required it. They also knew how to use the physical environment in the classroom to find words, resources or displays to help them with their activities. The student feedback on these strategies has been really positive; they love independent working sessions, so why was I observing all these disruptive behaviours? It was time to talk to my students!

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¹ *Semantic Maps* (see Figure 1) are used to encourage students to recall prior knowledge, organise their ideas and show growth in their learning.

² *Venn Diagrams* (see Figure 2) can be used in more than one way. I often use them to encourage students to find and categorise specific information such as differences and similarities about two related phenomena (e.g., night and day) or groups of things (e.g., snails and slugs).

³ *Fact Files* (see Figure 3) assist students to distinguish between fact and opinion. Students are required to record precise and meaningful facts.

⁴ *Thought Balloons* (see Figure 4) encourage students to investigate what they know about a topic and what they would like to learn.
I called my grade ones to the floor and explained my concerns. I asked them why they were "off-task" so often during the session. "My hands get sore!" "I get tired!" "Kids talk to me and I can't get back to work." "I just need a rest!" The students' responses really made me think about the lack of coping strategies they have when they get tired during a session and they certainly don't consider the learning needs of other students.

I considered this problem for some time before I came up with a solution. In fact it was the student responses that eventually provided me with the answer. I had to teach my students how to have a break when they feel they can no longer learn or work effectively.

We started off by brainstorming the reasons why students need a break. We discussed the sorts of activities you could do while having a break, we looked at the learning needs of students and how we could cater for these in the classroom. The discussion was a success. The students were enthusiastic about trying it out.

To begin with, students had to tell me when they were taking a break, as well as what activity they were going to do during that time. It certainly was a novelty. During the first ten minutes of the next session nearly every child had a break, some were even up to their second. They were going to need some practice!

Perseverance paid off. A few weeks later, my students were taking breaks effectively. I know that there were other solutions to this problem, but none which placed the responsibility of learning onto the students. One solution could have been to build in regular class breaks during my sessions or I could have developed a program which consisted of short, isolated lessons. I also could have spent the rest of the year asking Luke to get back to his chair or for the scissors to be taken out of the fish tank.

I believe I was successful because I shared my concern with my students. We had the shared responsibility to find a solution and make it work. This experience has broadened my views about what effective learning really is. It is the students, not the teachers, who ultimately have the control over their learning. Students must decide when they can learn effectively, just as they must decide when they cannot. My responsibility is to help students understand how their decisions affect their learning, not to make the decisions for them.
Figure 1: A Semantic Map

Figure 2: A Venn Diagram
Figure 3: A Fact File

Figure 4: Some Thought Balloons

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