

## WRITING AND TEACHING CASES

I say that the strongest principle of growth lies in human choice.  
George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*

### WRITING CASES

A typical case study presents student with a problem situation and asks them to choose a solution and outline a plan of action to implement their choice. The case studies in this book are modeled after those developed at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration. Like those, they are based on data obtained from actual situational by means of field research. Typically these cases have no single "right" answer, although some solutions are acknowledged to be better than others. All of them offer a dilemma, a knotty problem, for consideration. For example, in the "Greg Wright and Twin Rivers Presbytery" case a minister is caught between the conservative attitudes expressed by some members of denomination and his insistent demands of his own conscience; a priest in the "Dante Cavallo" case is anxious to preserve life yet unwilling to prolong suffering; a group of laity at "Walnut Avenue Church" is divided over how to make the best use of funds available to the church. All these situations will provoke radically different responses and suggestions for action from students.

A case study usually asks that a decision be made on the basis of the facts in the case and that a rationale be constructed for ways in which this decision may be put into effect. A case may raise questions at many levels. It may seek for plans to solve a problem of resource allocation or a plan to raise the consciousness of certain people involved in the situation. It may be the locus for ethical reflection. A case may be used in an evaluative way, to raise the question of what the selection of a particular set of goals says about our values and the ways in which we choose to order our lives. It may also raise theological questions of commitment and doctrine, meaning and alienation, life and death. In order to sustain analysis on all these levels the writers have sought to present in these studies a richness of factual material while at the same time endeavoring to construct the cases in a streamlined form so that they will be manageable during a class session.

Some cases seem, at first reading, to present just a slice of life.

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However, as any student of literature knows, each *tranche de vie* has its own peculiar slant. Case-writing and case-teaching are closely interrelated, and the particular slant of a case is determined in part by the use to which it is to be put in the classroom. Thus, before we go further in our discussion of case teaching it is worthwhile to pursue the subject of case selection and case writing.

### Case Selection

While a number of cases are presently being made available through the Intercollegiate Case Clearing House at Harvard Business School, it is likely that you will select one or more situations and begin to develop your own cases. In this event, some of the pointers which follow may be of use to you.

Material which gives the promise of yielding a good case study is called a case "lead." It is important to be discriminating when choosing a case lead. A situation may look promising to an outsider, but when the lead is pursued further the researcher may discover that either there are no substantial conflicts or else they are too poorly articulated to bear investigation. It is helpful to bear in mind four simple criteria in your selective process:

- 1) Does the situation pose some kind of dilemma, a problem for which there is no easy solution?
- 2) Are the participants in the actual event willing to cooperate with you and enable you to gather the information needed?
- 3) Is there a person or organization who is willing to take responsibility for "releasing" the case? Case studies are assumed to be confidential until written permission or "release" is given for them to be used in a specific course, educational program or textbook.
- 4) Does the study of the situation relate to a course need or objective?

Case leads can be found in newspapers, magazine articles, denominational reports, through conversations with friends, or through personal experience. Harvard Business School issues a caveat to its researchers against the latter involvement because the writer as participant can fail to achieve sufficient distance from the real case to write the document objectively. On the other hand, if you can assemble enough data whether by interview or through "inside knowledge" to recreate the situation, and if you can subject the case to the critical eye of another person for helpful distancing, then an "insider" case may prove valuable indeed.

Perhaps a brief word of warning may help you avoid one of the common pitfalls new case-writers encounter. You may be tempted to piece together a case from generalized experience, but you would do well to abandon this idea. The case that emerges full-blown and credible from the mind of the case-writer is truly rare. One can scarcely manage the internal consistency in such a case, and often an air of unreality pervades it. By the same token, if students know the case material to be based on a real-life event and not just a series of impressions which have been manipulated to produce a certain outcome, then they are more likely to give it serious consideration.

### Case Research

It is best to try to be introduced to the participants in your case situation by someone with whom they are familiar. The best church cases are often constructed from data which is found in controversial and emotion-laden arenas of human interaction. It is difficult for people involved in such situations to open themselves up to an outsider. Sometimes a proposal to write a case will meet with refusal. However, if the case is public enough, written documents may supply sufficient information.

It is important for you to be an accurate, if not meticulous, observer and recorder of facts. Events, opinions, chronology, biographical data are all important in establishing the network of circumstance which makes up the plot of the case. Asking yourself the following questions can help:

- 1) Are you obtaining sufficient information so the case will relate essential facts?
- 2) Have you given careful attention to the timing so that you know which event preceded others?
- 3) Do you have personal interviews with key people who represent the existing range of opinion on the issues?
- 4) Have you kept an open mind? If you can resist prejudicial and dogmatic judgments, you might discover an even richer case than you had hoped to find.
- 5) Are the persons involved in the actual case assured of confidentiality and agreeable to your using the disguise mechanism if one is called for. In church cases, changing the name of the denomination, the name of the local congregation and the names of the principal figures in the case seems to provide a satisfactory disguise.

## WRITING THE CASE

Because putting together a case involves a unique approach with its own rules and conventions, writing the case is, for many people, the most difficult part of the process. A precise definition of case style evades articulation; roughly speaking it might be described as a hybrid composed of journalistic, artistic and literary approaches.

As a case-writer, you will need to adhere to some of the guidelines of good journalism. Unbiased reporting of the facts, with a high degree of accuracy is one goal to keep in mind. Cases, unlike articles, theses, and the like, avoid statements of opinion or hypothesis. The temptation to editorialize with statements like, "It was a typical board meeting," or "Mr. Johnson exercised brilliant leadership" should be resisted. If such perspectives on the situation are necessary, it is best to let the participants in the case provide them. Thus, the case might include such statements as: "members of the board reported that their meeting was a typical one," or, "Mr. Johnson was acknowledged by the congregation to have provided them with brilliant leadership." In general, the case-writer states things which are to be taken as unalterable fact, while statements of opinion are reserved for the persons or groups who hold them.

To a limited degree, the case exhibits some of the characteristics of an art form. The case-writer, like the artist, operates within the restrictions of the form he has chosen. The following case form, or outline, is most commonly used and may be of help to you:

- 1) Introduction. A statement of the problem and a hint at various alternatives which the protagonist(s) are considering. Placing a concrete setting at the beginning of a case is a vehicle case-writers often use to get the reader immediately involved in the action-orientation of the case.
- 2) Exposition. Several paragraphs of background material serve to give the readers essential facts about the past and lead them to the present.
- 3) Development section. The central issues unfold in this part of the case. Included in this section are conversations among participants, reflections they make, and other significant contemporary data.
- 4) Summary or recapitulation of the problem.
- 5) Exhibits. Any pertinent material that would detract from the text by introducing an element of artificiality can be included in the case study "answer" to appendixes.

One of the keys to structuring a good case is a thorough preliminary analysis of the various issues in the case before beginning to write. Needless to say, it is important to focus these issues so that they relate to course or class objectives. Good case-writing is expressive writing. The case-writer does an analysis and then remains in the wings, letting both the facts and the characters; actions and opinions dramatize the story. One important job for you, then, is to learn how to symbolize or suggest a frame of mind, an approach to a problem, and attitude. A certain fact or statement may be used to represent a much larger reality. To a sharp eye a church budget can be a clue to the priorities and limits a congregation has assigned to the life of the congregation.

Several case conventions can help you maintain the illusion of reality that you are working so hard to create. Throwing the reader directly into the situation at the beginning of the case establishes the fact that the action is to be seen through the eyes of the participants. As a general rule the case-writer, a potential disrupter of the "willing suspension of disbelief" that a case creates, does not appear as a character.

By skillfully handling transition, you can allow the story to emerge in a natural way. The use of juxtaposition as a tool to enhance meaning and create drama is important to keep in mind. Other devices, such as recording small sequences of conversation verbatim, describing the environment colorfully, all add to the "reality" of the case.

A good case will operate at many levels of abstraction. While at one point in the discussion a student might be prevailed upon to discuss the pastoral versus the priestly responsibilities of a minister to a congregation, another time the students are pushed to decide what they would actually do to balance the two roles in the context of the case situation. In other words, a strong case is one which allows the instructor to ask both the abstract and the concrete question in the classroom. Part of the excitement of writing a case is knowing that you as its author are able to construct it with that built-in-versatility. It is knowing that in many different ways the document you create has the potential to challenge students to make a choice; to challenge them to exercise their moral and ethical judgment. Perhaps this process will help them come to an expanded realization of what alternatives they are truly allowing themselves, and the extent of their opportunities for growth.

Thus far we have focused on a standard case format -- a kind of "case orthodoxy." There exist a number of valuable alternatives in selecting and writing cases -- a variety of potentially helpful "heresies" if you will. Case construction and collection is still in an experimental phase within theological education. As you experiment in case-writing and teaching, it is important that you share your insights and the new forms you discover.

## TEACHING THE CASE

The case-study teacher is not the traditional dispenser of knowledge found in most classrooms; rather, he or she is a learner along with the students. The case teacher attempts to foster meaningful dialogue among students in as many ways as are possible but avoids structuring the outcome of the discussion in any way. If the case is germane to the objectives of the course, then the discussion it provokes will very likely be fruitful.

Those reading the case and preparing it will be focusing on a singular, albeit compressed, experience. This confluence of events may be unique and unrepeatable, but readers cannot help applying their own analogous memories and hopes, insights and attitudes, as they study it. By the same token, there can be no foolproof prediction of the resolution of the "knot" or problem. The struggle to meet the case with an ethical, theologically viable, coherent, and practical solution or evaluation is what the class time is about.

Those discussing the case probably share a number of common ideals and/or principles; they have no doubt undertaken personal quests for such intangibles as honesty, love, justice, peace. How the students rank these common ideals as priorities in the process of formulating solutions to case problems will vary immensely. Thus a specific "game plan" for each case would be next to useless. Because classroom, groups, and purposes are so divergent, only general suggestions will be offered.

The teacher must first probe the students' insight into the case. What *is* the situation, not just what does it *appear* to be? What changes are possible? Who can bring them about? How? What is the role of...? How do formalized strategies fare in meeting the needs of this situation? Which responses cover more of the "pain" points? Why? Questions like these are useful in getting the discussion started.

Probe in as many ways as you can. When a student moves the discussion into areas you did not intend to focus on, keep with the person's insights so long as the group seems to be benefiting. When a person makes outlandish assessments or decisions, call on another student for evaluation. "What do you think of that, Susan?" "Does that sound fishy to you?" When imprecise words are used by students, try to restate them with sharper expressions if you can. Turn student questions back to the asker. "That's a good question. What lies behind it in the way of intimations about a solution?" In every way seek to explore the situation as an observer, analyst, and ethical person.

Your second job is to referee. As opinions and information surface, you will be tempted to press for consensus and to minimize conflicts and differences. But the temptation is well worth resisting. In the rarefied atmosphere of a classroom, you can even multiply the friction by exaggerating differences of opinion in order to stimulate critical reflection. "Bill, that's exactly the opposite of what Susan is saying." "Susan, what are you going to say to *that*?" "Why, that's not at all where Evelyn seems to be." "Harry, you're frowning. Does that sound foolish to you?"

Your third job is to oversee what is being constructed by the students. It might be that the group relieves you of this responsibility, but you have it until someone assumes it. Students may proceed to construct a model of the situation, rules for action, strategies based on the input from collateral readings -- there are any number of options. They will not be able to solve all the problems or answer all the questions raised in the case. They may, however, address at least some of them. The best fun occurs when a group sets parameters and applies experience in depth to one aspect of the case. Whatever their process for addressing the situation, people can learn to trust one another as they discuss case studies, to learn from one another's contributions, to build on one another's suggestions. Practically speaking, the rudiments of social organization in general and of the church in particular are present in the very event of studying the case. People will exhibit cooperation, internal controls, leadership, mutual assistance, creativity -- perhaps even courage. You are superintending these developments as well as the more obvious ones.

Here are some practical aids which other-case teachers suggest you might draw upon during class sessions:

1) **Role Play.** You may wish to assign parts either to individuals or to the group as a whole, either for brief and informal periods or for more extensive times. "You are the session of the church, the advisors, the power elite, the blacks of the community."

2) **Votes.** "How many of you think they should just give up? Raise your hands. How many think they should organize? How many think they can fight it out by themselves? Commit suicide? Admit they are wrong?" etc. Calling for positions on less significant issues will often facilitate honest confrontation of the more important ones.

3) **Chair placement.** Do two or more students agree? Place them together in the room and let them "evangelize" others in their point of view. At some point you may have several groups seated around representing different opinions, changing their seats as they change their minds. It will

increase side-conversations to do this, but informal learning may increase proportionally. You can always dissolve the groups of students if you encounter too much interference with the train of the discussion.

4) **Time limits.** It frequently helps to be aware of the time in dealing with cases, just as it does when one is involved in simulation games and counseling sessions. A warning of specific time limits on individual remarks will allow you the unquestioned right to interrupt the "sermonizer" who likes the sound of his/her own voice. Students familiar with the case-study process develop a capacity for putting a check on their over-talkative colleagues, thus relieving the instructor of this task.

5) **Honesty.** Admitting your own feelings will help others do the same. But it is not just with feelings that honesty is desirable. If the strategy sounds unbelievable or has been disproven in practice, you should say that you think so. "Blue sky," cynical, or other inappropriate language should be labeled as such. Remember the class has a right to rebuttal when you enter the fray.

6) **Call for evidence.** You don't want to foster legalism, to be sure. However, occasionally you need to refocus on the actual experience to be addressed. "When evidence have you that it would work?" Offers an open possibility for response either from the case or from personal experience.

7) **Call on participants.** Frequently the pensive person can use a nudge. If the threat level seems low for almost everyone, it becomes easy to ask: "George, you surely have been quiet. How does that sound to you?"

8) **Observe the "little things."** Eye contact, noise level, body attitudes, and side remarks will help you know when to pause and when to move on if you are attentive to them.

9) **Relate contributions.** You can buttress the constructive process by rephrasing one person's words in the vocabulary of another. "Susan, is that what you meant by ----?" Teaching a case can be compared in some sense to playing a hand of cards. It is your job as instructor to remember what cards have been played and what important points have been left out. You are then in a position to relate contributions, build on points that have been made previously, and elicit responses in areas that have not been explored. In order to do all this well you must have a thorough knowledge of the issues in the case and all the possible paths of action that might be taken, so that when a student makes a point its implication is immediately clear to you and you can (a) exercise judgment as to whether to encourage the student to push forward with the analysis and discover another related point, or (b) see that the student's statement conflicts with, or is part of an important part of, the assumption another student made ten

minutes before. Some conservative professors at Harvard Business School say it takes a minimum of eight hours to prepare a new case.

10) **Closure.** It is really is inappropriate to interject one of your cherished observations at the end of the session. If it is an important one it should be included earlier in the class. However, it is most appropriate to comment truthfully on the enterprise as people have experienced it. You can call on others for help here, too.

These admonitions on writing and teaching cases have been presented in a rather hortative way for you. However, we hope they will serve you temporarily as you gain mastery of this method of teaching and writing. Good wishes to you.