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Timothy V. Rasinski
Kent State University

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The Case Method Approach in Reading Education

Timothy V. Rasinski

Imagine sitting in on a course in reading education where the class is engaged in a lively discussion of the application of some method of reading instruction. The discussion focuses on a real incident that the students had read about the evening before. Some students agree with the approach taken by the teacher in the case in handling the instruction. Others approve of the general methodology employed but disagree with the teacher's instruction and timing. Still another group of students questions the entire approach chosen by the teacher to teach reading. From a general discussion about method the class begins to deal with issues of theory and instructional philosophy. Students are active participants in the class. The instructor has her hands full simply moderating the discussion and tossing in points to consider.

Unfortunately most classes in reading education do not generally follow this pattern. Perhaps a more common description of a course in reading education, especially at the undergraduate level, would involve the teacher lecturing to the class while the students attempted to fill up their notebooks with the knowledge poured forth by the instructor. Occasionally the students might be involved in a demonstration of method or in a micro-teaching experience in which they attempt to teach a lesson or a portion of a lesson to a small group of peers. However, for the most part, students are passive participants in the classroom activities that unfold in their college level coursework.

It seems rather odd that the type of pedagogical orientation that teacher educators attempt to instill in their students is one that places the learner in an active, participant role in learning. Even in reading education we speak of the reader actively engaging personal schemata in the reading act. We speak of the reader as an active participant in the unfolding of the text and the construction of meaning. The irony here is that the teaching method most often used to convince college level students of the logic and merit of this activist orientation places those novice teachers in a passive position of intellectual subjugation to the instructor. In effect, reading teacher educators do not practice what they preach. In this respect they are not modeling the type of teaching that they will expect from their students when those students go out into the field.

A new approach to the teaching of reading education is needed, one that is not focused totally on method but sensitive to the situations and contexts in which methodologies are to be applied. A new approach to reading education is needed that encourages the active participation of students and values their views about reading pedagogy. We need an approach that creates a forum in which ideas grounded in the real world of the classroom are free to be expressed and forced to be examined critically. A method that allows for this to happen is also one that is highly suited to coursework in reading education. It is the case study or case method approach.

The Case Method Approach

The case method approach I propose is based upon one developed at the Harvard Business School and employed in the curricula of numerous business schools across the United States. The centerpiece of this approach to learning is the individual "case." It has been defined by Megginson (1980)

as “. . .a real life situation researched and produced by scholars with such detailed, sufficient care and fidelity that it permits the inclusion of sufficient environmental information of a situation.” The case presents a situation or a problem that is real in terms of nature, players, and setting and for which there are a number of alternative courses of action, each with its own set of positive and negative effects. The case, then, becomes the document that is the focus of class discussion. Class members are asked to decide on a course of action and be ready to provide a rationale and defense of the action based on theoretical and pragmatic grounds. Other class members critique the students’ analyses of the problem and offer their own solutions.

The case study approach to learning requires students to know more than just the facts. Students are forced to use the knowledge gained from teacher and textbooks, to make decisions, to predict outcomes, and to think critically and creatively. Romm and Mahler (1986) have identified from the literature three advantages of the case method over more traditional teaching methods. These are: (1) the ability to lend itself to theoretical understanding and insight, (2) success in inducing motivational and psychological involvement, and (3) the ability to foster self-directed learning in students. Inasmuch as we wish teachers to develop an articulated theory of education, to be motivated and involved in solving problems related to schooling, and to become self-sustaining learners, the case method approach may be well-suited to teacher education in general and reading teacher education in particular.

The Case Method in Reading Education

Most college level textbooks treat their subject matter as if it was a set of static facts or principles abstracted from the

hazy world of real life and presented in the "sanitized" format of the book. Shulman (1986), however, has argued that the learning of propositional knowledge (facts and principles) by itself is an insufficient knowledge base for teachers. Two other knowledge forms are necessary. These are case knowledge and strategic knowledge. Case knowledge involves the application of principles to specific classroom events and contexts. Strategic knowledge involves the application of multiple and contradictory principles. Shulman argues that these two higher forms of knowledge required for effective teaching are best learned through a case method approach.

Reading education lends itself very well to a case method approach. Currently there exists no consensus in the field as to the best approach to the teaching of reading. Optimal reading instruction occurs when teachers make informed decisions based upon the multitude of factors that impact on the various outcomes that are demanded of reading instruction.

Becoming a skilled teacher of reading involves having an extensive knowledge of the child as a reader and of the various principles of reading instruction. However, in addition to being knowledgeable about children and reading, skilled teachers need to be able to make informed decisions about the application of reading methods in the face of particular classroom contexts in which conflicting principles, values, and/or goals exist.

For example, a familiar principle of reading instruction is that teachers should act as models of reading for their students. One highly advocated method for expressing this principle is through reading trade books to the class as often

as possible. Most novice teachers are aware of this principle and method. Yet how might teachers react when this principle brings on conflict?

How should a teacher react when the school principal or a parent takes issue with the overuse of reading to the class? How does a teacher respond to a principal's taunt that reading aloud to the class is a waste of instructional time and that it conflicts with the principle of maximizing student engagement in productive reading and writing activities? Students are supposed to enjoy naturally the read aloud activities. But what does a teacher do with a child who does not appear to be listening to the story and, in fact, appears intent on disrupting the read aloud session?

Problems such as these are not trivial. These are the irritations and frustrations that are the bane of the reading teacher's classroom life and are the types of problems that may cause a teacher to give up on reading aloud after only a few tries.

Yet one will find no mention of real life problems such as these in any textbook on reading instruction. Nor is it likely that such problems could be dealt with easily through a class lecture or other highly structured teaching approach. The solution to problems such as the ones described above are based upon a variety of contextual factors such as teacher style and pedagogical orientation, nature of the school and classroom, type of student(s), etc. No one solution is best in all cases.

A case study approach allows a creative discussion and analysis of possible solutions to problems. Constraints to certain courses of action are noted, underlying causes and

principles at play are considered. Students see and learn the *process* of decision-making as it occurs in the classroom. This knowledge of the process will help them in the classroom dilemmas and problems that they will inevitably have to face on their own.

Criticism of the Case Method Approach

Potential criticism of a case method approach to reading education seems to fall into three categories: (1) most students in reading education courses will probably have a real field experience in which they will have real opportunities to try out their knowledge, (2) a case study approach, with its open-ended discussion format, takes too much time away from regular class activities, or (3) many reading education courses already incorporate a case study approach. A brief response to each criticism follows.

It is true that a significant component in most teacher education programs is a field experience in which students assume the roles of teacher and teacher aide in real classrooms. The purpose of such experiences is to allow novice teachers opportunities to put into practice the knowledge gained in the various methods courses taken. Critics of a case study approach may claim that the field experience component makes the use of a case methodology redundant and unnecessary.

On the contrary, the case study approach is an excellent bridge between learning teaching methods and having to employ them. In many field experiences students are under minimal supervision with little chance to contact, and discuss concerns with, colleagues and teachers save their coordinating teacher. With a case study approach students are able to

try out methods and decisions under the supervision of a trained teacher educator and the critical inspection of their peers. Moreover, decisions made in a case study do not carry the same ramifications as those made in the classroom. The consequences of decisions made in a case study are hypothetical, not real. They do not involve the potential of impacting on real people. Finally, the case approach allows students the time to deliberate over courses of action. Decisions made in a field-based classroom are often made under duress and with minimal deliberation time. Certainly the training in decision-making under the case approach will help teachers make better decisions when faced with the constraints of the real classroom.

A second potential criticism of the case study approach is that the open-ended discussions take too much time, time that could have been used in dispensing pedagogical knowledge. My reply to this assertion is simply that you get what you pay for. If we desire teachers who are informed decision-makers, who are reflective in choosing courses of action, then it is necessary to invest time in allowing students practice in being reflective and making informed decisions. If more time is required to present the knowledge base for reading education, then the curriculum may be expanded accordingly.

Indeed, calls for reform of the teacher education process advocate giving longer periods of time to teacher education training. Perhaps a portion of this extra time could be used to accommodate both the presentation of basic pedagogical knowledge and the hypothetical implementation of such knowledge through the consideration of case studies.

A third possible criticism of a case study approach to reading education points to the fact that some reading educa-

tion courses already incorporate case studies, usually either brief scenarios described by the instructor or written up within the textbook itself. While not denying that such "case studies" do appear in reading education courses, those cases usually suffer from one or two major drawbacks. First, the cases are usually too brief to give the case a flavor for the contextual environment around which the topic is addressed. The cases do not permit strong consideration of factors other than ones about which the case is written. Second, cases of this sort are often written for illustrative rather than deliberative purposes. Authors of these cases write them to illustrate a point or to demonstrate how an instructional method might work in a classroom. There is no point at which students are forced to consider alternatives and make informed choices. There is no dilemma presented. These kinds of case studies are not well adapted to critical discussions of issues in reading education, nor do they encourage growth in decision-making skills.

It should be noted that case studies as envisioned in this paper are not at all like the case reports that are often the result of clinical diagnoses of children with reading problems. Case reports tend to be a static description of one child. Case studies in a case method approach are more global and descriptive in choice of topic, subjects, and context and do not suggest or lead to any one particular course of action.

Using the Case Method

I have used a case study approach as a supplement to several undergraduate and graduate level courses I have taught in reading education over the past two years. In the graduate level classes, I have asked students who are currently teaching to develop case studies based upon a critical issue they have had to deal with in the teaching of

reading. After a model case in which I lead the discussion, the students lead the class in discussion and analysis of their own cases. For undergraduates, I have developed case studies based upon problems I encountered as a classroom teacher of reading and I have also used some of the cases developed by students in the graduate classes. With the undergraduates I lead the class discussion of the case studies.

The cases I have used and seen used in my courses have usually incorporated multiple parts. In the normal routine of doing a case study, the first part (Part A) of a case would be passed out to the students to be read and analyzed at the class prior to its scheduled discussion. On the day of the class discussion the discussion leader asks one person to summarize the case and a second person to fill in any missing details. Then the class settles into a lively consideration of the issues and potential courses of action.

The cases can focus on a variety of issues. In my own classes I have seen cases dealing with parents, disinterest in reading among students, diagnosis of reading problems, reading instruction in kindergarten, and creating an environment conducive to reading. After Part A has been discussed thoroughly (usually between 15 and 40 minutes) a second part (Part B) of the case is presented. Part B is usually shorter in length and describes a course of action chosen by the teacher in the case and the response that was encountered. It is not unusual for Part B to conclude with the teacher facing another set of related problems. A short discussion of part B is normally followed by a conclusion in which statements of principles and generalizations, if appropriate, are abstracted from the case and discussion.

My experience with the case method approach, as described here, has been singularly positive. Usually after a

short period in which students are either reticent or trying to find the one and only correct solution, students become lively participants in the discussions. They have expressed enjoyment at the challenge of taking a position, providing a principled rationale, and defending the position against critical analysis. Students have expressed a renewed sense of worth and self confidence as they find that their ideas have value in the eyes of their course instructor and peers. They are more willing to discuss actively problems in the classroom with their peers from a more critical, creative and professional point of view. Best of all, students participating in case study discussions seem more prepared for and confident in dealing with the instructional dilemmas of real classrooms in intelligent and thoughtful ways.

The case study approach is certainly not a panacea for all the difficulties inherent in teaching reading education courses. However, it opens up many possibilities for actively engaging students in their own learning. I have found it well worth the effort.

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Timothy V. Rasinski is a faculty member in the Department of Teacher Development and Curriculum Studies at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio.