The Use of Case Studies in Library Administration Courses and Work: Student and Practitioner Perceptions and Insights

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Student and Practitioner Perceptions and Insights

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Library and information studies (LIS) programs generally require that students complete a series of core courses. One of these common core courses required is library management, and for many students this may be the only opportunity to explore issues and concerns related to library management. Contrary to what they may think, most of these future librarians will have to make significant decisions related to management at some point in their careers. Almost every job in a library requires an awareness of the concepts of organizational behavior that typically underpin the library management course. Obviously this will be of greater importance for some than for others. Given the task of overseeing a small academic library shortly after graduating with my MLIS twelve years ago, I was especially sensitive to this need (I had originally planned to be an instruction librarian, not a library administrator). While it may be difficult to prepare library science students for every situation, we can provide them with some ways to improve their thinking when faced with problems and challenges. Active learning, specifically through the use of case studies, is one of the best ways to do just that. In an attempt to explore this further, preliminary research was conducted to investigate student perceptions of the value of case studies employed within a specific context. Additionally, practicing librarians were polled to determine whether or not the use of case studies in their MLIS program benefited them when making library administration decisions in their careers. The findings summarized in this paper illustrate both the benefits and shortcomings to the use of case studies in library education. Some implications for both library science students and practicing librarians are considered.

Joel Michael, working with faculty to determine barriers to active learning and to help clarify its meaning, states that it consists of "building, testing, and repairing one's mental model of what is being learned."[1] In addition to the widespread use of case studies (primarily taken from *Library Journal*), one of the more in-depth assignments required of students in my course is something called a case study group project. This idea is not new. Case studies have been used since 1910 in business colleges and more recently have found their way into science, nursing, and other classrooms.[2] In the context of teacher education, Susan Adler defines a case study as "a problematic situation facing a teacher which calls for some decision or action on the teacher's part. The case is intended to draw students into engagement with situations, problems, and roles representative of those faced in 'real life' classrooms."[3] While Adler successfully used the case study approach with a group of ninety-six preservice secondary student teachers, she reported that she found little evidence of research examining how case studies might improve the thinking of preservice teachers or, stated differently, how those teachers valued the use of case studies in the classroom when they were required to make real work decisions.[4] Likewise, no research was found that sought to examine how LIS students' thinking might be affected by the case study approach, specifically with regard to whether, as practicing librarians, they felt the use of case studies had better prepared them to make good decisions.

The advantages of case studies have been documented in many instances, not just in the context of active learning but also in considerations of their ability to foster critical thinking, which, according to Clyde Freeman Herreid, includes "problem solving, skepticism, flexibility, and seeing alternative strategies."[5] Advantages of using case studies are numerous but essentially boil down to the student having an opportunity to experience workplace challenges in a safe environment with a chance to both provide and receive feedback and thus continually enhance and improve their level of thinking regarding a given issue or dilemma. Many students also enjoy learning this way because of the relatively engaging narrative format.[6] Faculty-perceived barriers to their use have fallen into three general categories: student characteristics (e.g., they are just not capable of doing this), teacher characteristics (e.g., faculty are afraid to relinquish some of the control they have of the more traditional classroom situation), and pedagogical concerns (e.g., the faculty member fears not covering all of the content).[7] It is perhaps these perceived barriers that have prevented the case method from being more widely applied.

In 2003, I was fortunate enough to participate in the Association of College and Research Libraries/Harvard

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Leadership Institute. The case method was used extensively in this setting. In fact, Harvard Business School's almost obsessive reliance upon case studies has been discussed at length in the recently released book *Ahead of the Curve: Two Years at Harvard Business School.*[8] As part of that week-long experience, participants were required first to read *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* by Bolman and Deal.[9] Furthermore, attendees were asked to bring to the institute a narrative of an actual problem or case that they had been or were currently involved in. During the week, the one hundred library administrators in attendance were broken into smaller groups of six to eight. Each attendee was then asked to read each of our group members' cases and, during a series of set times throughout the week, provide some analysis of problems and offer possible solutions on the basis of the four frames described by Bolman and Deal (political, symbolic, human resource, and structural).[10] It became apparent later on that this method, with some additional guidance, could be used with graduate students as well, and it was implemented for my own students.

Developing the Case Study Group Project

The concept of the case study group project was first piloted in a course during the fall of 2007. Students were required to either write their own case of a library problem or incident they were involved in or interview a librarian to get a case. These cases were then shared with group members. Group members were required to analyze each other's cases and provide their written thoughts and possible solutions. Students met in class to discuss their cases (one whole class period was set aside for this) and were then required to submit final reflections on their own case based on both the written and verbal feedback they had received. It should be noted that in this first iteration they were not required to use the Bolman and Deal text. Instead, students were required to apply a single conflict-resolution model to each case. As noted, many elements of the project were built along parameters such as establishing groups or teams, contacting real practitioners, and structuring the analysis. These aspects of the project were suggested by the Harvard Leadership Institute approach but also by McKeachie in his classic text *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers.*[11] As a follow up to the course students were asked questions about each piece of the class. With regard to this project students were queried as follows: "On a scale of 1–5 (1 being least and 5 being most) how meaningful and useful a learning experience was the case study group project?" Fifteen of twenty students responded. Seven students (46.7 percent) chose ranking 5 ("very meaningful and useful"), six students (40 percent) selected ranking 4 ("meaningful and useful"), and only two students (13.3 percent) chose ranking 2 ("not very meaningful or useful at all"). It also should be noted that the larger outcome of the course to which this project was meant to contribute, and which was made explicit to the students, was that students would be able to diagnose work situations and develop feasible solutions using the student's judgment and knowledge of management techniques. Therefore the students had a clear goal against which to measure.

As a result of the pilot, in the spring of 2008 it was felt that Bolman and Deal's text could be used in coursework alongside other parameters that had been established in the pilot. The course syllabus was adapted so that each week discussions took place centered on at least one of the four frames: political, human resource, structural, and symbolic. The amount of time spent applying the four frames to given *Library Journal* case studies also was gradually increased. Rather than focusing on any specific answers they might provide, the focus was more on the kinds of questions that each approach should force one to consider. For example, when thinking about the human resource perspective, one might ask questions such as, What are the characters' motivations? What emotions might the individuals in the case have that relate to their behaviors? etc. Students were required to use at least two frames for each analysis. Aside from the use of frames, this iteration of the project resembled the pilot. Also, this class consisted of twenty-three students, so some of the groups were slightly larger, with five students to each.

Method

Following completion of the case study assignment, a survey was administered to all of the students. The purpose of the survey was to determine, from the students' perspective, how useful each separate component of the project was as well as how useful the project as a whole was toward their learning experience. Therefore students were asked to rate each piece in this regard. They also were asked how the various pieces of the assignment could be altered for a more effective learning experience in the future. Additionally, students were asked to indicate which of the frames they selected. Lastly, students were asked to provide an overall rating of how the assignment met the stated course outcome.

Another survey was developed that posed questions similar to those provided to the students in the administration course but focused more on the use of case studies in general library education. It was not a longitudinal study examining the same groups. The survey was sent out to the library staff at Queens University, Johnson and Wales University, Rhode Island College, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the State Library of South Carolina, and the Metrolina Library Association. Respondents were asked specifically their current job titles, how many years they had been in the field, and whether or not case studies

were employed when they took a library management course or equivalent when they studied for their MLIS degree. If their MLIS program did involve the use of case studies, they were asked to rate their use in learning and to indicate how useful they were in developing their ability to make good management-related decisions in the workplace. Lastly, they were asked to reflect upon the specific way or ways that case studies did and did not benefit them when it came to library workplace practices.

One obvious limitation in polling a different set of practicing librarians about how useful case studies had been to them both in their learning and later on the job is that there is no direct correlation between the specific case study method employed in the library administration course and the case study approaches used by these individuals. But the intent was to explore student conceptions of the case study as employed in a specific learning context and those of practicing librarians in a more general context. Any connections that may be drawn would need to keep this limitation in mind.

Student Survey Results

In total, eighteen of the twenty-three students chose to respond to the voluntary survey. The general hypothesis was that this project would adequately address the specified course outcome specifically as perceived by the LIS students. While the sample size was rather small, the hypothesis was confirmed. For example, the final question on the student survey as stated was, "On a scale of 1–5 (1 being least and 5 being most), how successful do you feel the case study project was toward accomplishing the following course objective listed on your syllabus: 'Students will learn to diagnose work situations and develop feasible solutions based on reasoned judgment and knowledge of management techniques?'" All of the respondents indicated that it was either "meaningful and useful" or "very meaningful and useful," respectively 4 and 5 on the Likert scale provided to them.

When it came to the actual components of the project, there were some slight differences in how meaningful and useful students viewed each piece. Students did not view the writing of the case or the class discussions as meaningful, and saw as more useful the writing of comments on group members' cases and reading the written comments provided by their group member's on their cases. Specifically, three students had "no opinion" on the value of case writing, and with regard to the class discussions, one student also indicated "no opinion" and another selected "not meaningful or useful at all." Again, since this data is from such a small group, it is difficult to determine whether this negative response was an anomaly.

The biggest surprise was the response to the question regarding the final reflective piece that students were required to write. From the instructor's perspective, this was the most important part of the project. Still, three students indicated "no opinion" on its usefulness and one indicated that it was "not very meaningful or useful at all." What also was surprising was that in the grading process it was readily apparent that this part was overwhelmingly their strongest piece as a class.

Two last pieces of data relative to the survey were whether or not individuals chose their own case or interviewed someone else to get it and which frames they used in analyzing their group members' cases. Thirteen of the eighteen respondents chose an incident to which they were either a direct witness or in which they participated. This seemed to make sense given the makeup of the class, which consisted of a mix of students, some of whom were working in libraries and some of whom were not. With regard to the survey question on frame use, seventeen respondents (94.4 percent) used the human resource frame, sixteen (88.9 percent) used the political frame, fifteen (83.3 percent) used the structural frame, and only ten (55.6 percent) used the symbolic frame. This also seemed to make sense, since a straw poll done prior to the project indicated most of the class saw themselves as having the human resources frame as a dominant mode of thinking.

While one impetus of this research was to determine how students perceived this project and the use of case studies, it is worth discussing briefly the actual results of their work. A simple grading matrix was used to determine student grades. The matrix was designed to consider all of the tangible components mentioned above. Essentially, students received separate scoring for their case, their analyses of their group member's cases, and their final reflective paper. Of the three components, they had the best relative scores on the latter, and with only a few exceptions their final reflections demonstrated a high level of critical thinking. In the best papers, students synthesized all of the feedback they had received, provided critical commentary on that feedback, and revealed the author's own problem-solving approach in coming up with a solution or in commenting on an actual solution if there was one. There were, however, deficiencies in some of the students' work. Eight cases suffered from a lack of clarity in writing style, unusual organization, or a lack of a clearly definable issue, an appropriate issue, or both. Undoubtedly, this made commenting on the cases more difficult. Perhaps partially because of this, the commenting stage is where they struggled the most. Nine of the projects demonstrated major deficiencies in this regard, the most common of which was the lack of explicit use of frames, or frames altogether, or the improper application of frames (e.g., using a frame in a way that does not make sense or applying it to the character's perspectives instead of the author's).

The final piece of the survey allowed students to provide any comments they wished to share about the project

and how it might be made into a more meaningful learning experience. Of the eighteen respondents, ten chose to write in this box. One student stated, "I would consider allowing students to use case studies that originated outside of the library setting." Another wrote, "I might allow students to use any work experience." Both of these students went on to suggest that, while the intent was to get them to think about the kinds of problems that showed up in libraries, they felt that having a more personal and authentic experience would have benefited the process, especially for those in the class without library experience but with other work experiences. The most obvious drawback to changing the assignment in this way is that the assignment was intended specifically to immerse them in the kinds of problems libraries face, some of which may be the same and some of which may differ from other work environments. Many management problems or dilemmas are just that, regardless of venue. The other common comment was that the self-written case studies should have been required earlier and should have been reviewed by the instructor prior to being shared with their groups, allowing the instructor to catch and correct any deficiencies as opposed to group members having to work with the cases as written.

Practitioner Survey Results

In total, thirty-four librarians responded to the case study survey. Seventeen (50 percent) of those who responded had eight or more years of experience as a professional librarian, eleven (32.4 percent) had between four and seven years of experience, and six (17.6 percent) had between one and three years of experience. While a variety of librarians responded to the survey, the largest group was library administrators (deans, directors, department heads), with fifteen (44.2 percent) falling into this category. Ten respondents (29.4 percent) were reference librarians and made up the second largest group. Of those who responded, twenty-four (70.6 percent) indicated that they had used case studies in their library management course when doing their MLIS. When asked, "When you were enrolled in the library administration and management course or equivalent, how useful did you believe the use of case studies was in providing you with a meaningful learning experience?" nineteen (73 percent) of those responding that had used case studies indicated that they were either "useful and meaningful" or "very useful and meaningful." Only two respondents (8 percent) indicated that they were "not very meaningful or useful at all." To the question, "After becoming a librarian, how meaningful and useful would you say the opportunity to explore case studies was in your MLIS program in relation to actual decision-making later on?" fourteen (54 percent) of those that had used case studies indicated that they were either "useful and meaningful" or "very useful and meaningful." In contrast to their response to the classroom experience, when asked about the later applicability of the case studies to workplace situations, eight (31 percent) indicated that they were either "not very meaningful and useful" or "not meaningful or useful at all."

In terms of qualitative data, all respondents were asked, "How specifically did the use of case studies help you in your role as a professional librarian?" Nineteen librarians chose to respond, and the comments varied considerably, though some common themes did arise. For those with no experience in libraries, the cases were a great opportunity to get a sense of what kinds of issues they would face in management roles. For example, one respondent stated, "They provided insight into the hidden world of libraries before we actually had to enter it." Likewise, other comments included "familiarity of the issues met in a professional setting," "increased my awareness of issues that impact librarians and library administration," and "gave me a better idea of what to expect in a real library setting and how to handle those situations." Another theme seemed to map back to both critical thinking and the course outcome for the library management course. Several librarians indicated that their thinking was better on the job as a result of using case studies with statements such as, "helped me to consider angles to an issue I might not have otherwise thought of," "case studies showed me that not everything is black and white," "resources to help make a more thoughtful decision," "helpful in realizing that most situations are not clear-cut," and "gave me a pattern to follow and ideas about how to take many factors into consideration."

Practitioners also were asked, "In which ways did the use of case studies not prepare you for the kinds of management-related problems and challenges you would face in the workplace?" The one shortcoming that seemed to stand out most from comments was inability of case studies to convey clearly an organization's culture and the personalities of participants in a given situation. For example, some comments included "don't really allow one to understand the organizational culture which the problem discussed takes place in," "until you learn the landscape of your own workplace environment, you can't rely upon what you learned in the classroom to solve most of your problems," "the stress level and various personalities, bureaucracies, and politics does not seem to be well translated in a graduate program," and "case studies rarely deal with personalities, which is what takes up so much of one's time, and is so stressful." Other comments reflected the specific concerns of individuals, such as regrets about not having more cases that covered coping with shrinking budgets or dealt with practical problems like overflowing toilets. One person also commented about the time factor. Case studies typically give one time to think things through, and in the everyday workplace some of the toughest decisions needed to be made on the spot.

Conclusions and Implications

One of the conclusions drawn from this research is that students did value the case studies project for what it was able to offer. The instructor would concur with this. It clearly did give them some basis for thinking about the kinds of problems that they may someday face as a librarian. Another conclusion to be drawn is that practicing librarians appreciated the opportunity to explore case studies in their MLIS programs, which served as real preparation for workplace challenges. It is interesting how the number of respondents who valued case studies relative to their program of study dropped off considerably when the question was phrased in terms of their current roles as librarians.

In considering the implications for library practitioners, a few issues do seem to stand out. Clearly, understanding organizational culture is critical to making good decisions. As such, we should consider the ways in which we bring in new librarians at any level. Some effort needs to be made toward getting the new library staff member, whether it is a reference librarian, cataloger, or administrator, to understand both the espoused and actual culture. This will help them to be more effective within an earlier time frame. Another implication is dealing with different personality types. Many organizations provide professional development opportunities along these lines, but the comments obtained in the surveys show it is important to help staff understanding their colleagues better both in the sense of personality traits and as individuals. Finally, while one does have, on occasion, the need to make quick decisions, we can still prepare staff for this eventuality. In library schools, instructors are required to sample a variety of settings and speak to a number of possibilities. In any work setting, however, certain types of issues tend to stand out more than others: Expensive private universities may have some common problems in dealing with angry or dissatisfied students, an urban public library may have patron challenges unique to its open access policies and urban location, and school libraries may face common urgent challenges in working with younger students, for example. Again, this speaks to how we prepare new employees.

It would appear that library science students are getting some valuable critical thinking skills and some understanding of library issues and concerns. When they come into the workplace, or when an experienced librarian moves into a new workplace, there is yet more opportunity for them to grow. We need to be as supportive as possible in this process and, while we can't create the "total safe zone" of the classroom, we need to be helpful and supportive in our efforts to help them help themselves. In terms of improving the classroom assignment for the library management course, it is apparent that more time could be spent working through the four frames and guiding students in their application. Also, some additional support may be needed in the writing of the case studies. In comparing some of the comments by the library practitioners to those of students, one also could consider exploring more ways to connect cases to organizational culture. Perhaps students could be required to include more of this piece in the writing of their case. More time spent on handling interpersonal issues, especially with respect to dealing with people of different personality types, would probably be beneficial as well.

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