Exploring the Case Study Method as a Tool for Teaching Public Administration
In a Cross-national Context: Pedagogy in Theory and Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores both the underlying theory and the practical application of incorporating case studies in teaching public administration in a cross-national context. Its purpose is to examine the role case studies can play in broadening students’ perspectives on approaches to public administration in governance settings other than those with which they are most familiar. Case study teaching is assessed with respect to its potential for addressing the impact of globalization on public administration teaching.

Following a discussion of theoretical foundations as background and introduction to the case study method, the paper describes its practical aspects, including types and forms of case studies, where they are found, what they aim to accomplish and factors for consideration in adopting them in a course of instruction. The paper then turns to some of the unique issues associated with incorporating a cross-national perspective in case study teaching in public administration, principally, the transfer of cases between contexts and among students of varying cultural backgrounds.

The paper concludes with suggestions and recommendations on ways in which international academic cooperation can enhance the potential for effective use of the case study method. Specifically, it proposes pursuing linkages and partnerships among related organizations and groups such as the European Group of Public Administration, American Society of Public Administration and the World Association for Case Method Research and Case Method Application.
Background and Introduction

In recent years the higher education community has confronted the challenges of globalization not only in terms of globalization’s impact on subject matter taught within the disciplines, but also with respect to broader implications for pedagogy. As Ronstadt (1993) observed,

> [m]any revolutionary changes are occurring in our world today. The globalization of society, multicultural diversity, new economic systems, the information revolution, genetic engineering, the struggle for female equality and freedom...are just a few. All are significant. But no less significant is the way people learn, how they are educated, and how they use their educations to improve the human condition (p. 1).

The theoretical foundation for teaching public administration in a cross-national context through case studies is found in Gaus’ (1947) support for taking an “ecological approach,” described as “…careful observation by many people in different environments of the roots of government functions, civic attitudes, and operating problems” (quoted in Stillman, 2005, p. 81). Although Gaus does not present his thesis as a rationale for cross-national approaches per se, the message can be interpreted in today’s global environment as posing opportunities and challenges for public administration education.

More recently, these challenges have come forward with the recognition that globalization has altered the boundaries of the administrative state (Farazmand, 1999). Banyan (2005) has also examined the implications of globalization in public administration education, focusing attention to trends in “internationalizing” curricula through applied experiences such as study abroad, internships and capstone projects as distinct from classroom pedagogies.

The case study teaching method poses opportunities to address these challenges from multiple perspectives. The context of cases can cross national boundaries, enabling students to gain insights into problems and proposed solutions that might not have come to light if presented solely within the confines of students’ domestic environments. Callahan, et al. (2005), in their introduction to a case book presented in a multi-cultural content, base their approach on the premise that problems found in one country can be found in others and that cultural understanding can be advanced through “vicarious” experiences from other parts of the world.

Further, the case study method lends itself to implementation in the classroom setting—whether in traditional, face-to-face format or virtual, via internet—as a means of incorporating an international focus to the theory or principle being taught, unlike experiential approaches that most often require a tailoring to the individual student’s situation or needs. It might be argued that, notwithstanding the benefits of individualized experiential approaches, the cross-cultural case study method of teaching offers a similar opportunity to all students in a class than do individualized experiences occurring outside
the traditional course structure. Whatever approach is adopted to address globalization in
the curriculum, the case study approach has potential for complementing out-of-
classroom experiences and may even be viewed as preparation for such experiences.

Before embracing the case study approach as having a role in meeting these challenges, it
behooves the international public administration teaching community to explore its use in
pragmatic terms. A comprehensive examination of each aspect of case study teaching is
beyond the scope of a single paper. Rather, an enumeration and discussion of the key
issues involved in cross-national case study teaching in public administration can form
the basis for continued dialogue and exchange of ideas. Recognition of the realities
associated with case study usage in teaching in a cross-national context will contribute to
its potential success as a tool in educating public administration practitioners to perform
effectively in the dynamic atmosphere that globalization brings to their work experiences.

The discussion revolves around three central areas: (1) practical aspects, including types
and forms of case studies, where they are found, what they aim to accomplish and factors
for consideration in adopting them in a course of instruction; (2) issues associated with
incorporating a cross-national perspective in case study teaching in public administration,
principally, the transfer of cases between contexts; and (3) ways in which international
academic cooperation can enhance the potential for effective use of the case study
method.

Practical Aspects

To be useful, any discussion on the pragmatics of an approach to teaching must begin
with a common understanding of the method being explored. The term “case study” in
fact, has numerous dimensions in education parlance in relation to the educational
objective underlying its use. Many types of cases are available. They can be
incorporated in a course of instruction at various levels (e.g., baccalaureate or graduate),
in various ways and aimed at achieving multiple objectives. This section attempts to sort
out this complexity, differentiating between and among the plethora of case study
teaching approaches available to the public administration educator. In this presentation,
each descriptive area is not necessarily mutually exclusive from another.

Types of Cases

The wide range of case studies makes any attempt at devising a typology somewhat
arbitrary. Gonzales and Starz (in Klein, 2001) describe some earlier efforts that attempt
to transcend disciplinary boundaries. Nonetheless, for purposes of this discussion, case
studies can be broadly separated into various dichotomies: micro vs. macro; conclusive
vs. inconclusive; actual vs. fictitious.

Micro vs. macro. Micro-level cases are those that occur in a brief timeframe in a confined
setting and are simple and straightforward in nature. Consequently, they are brief and to-
the-point. The problem described in a micro-level case is clear. The lack of complexity
makes the “lesson” inherent in the case obvious to students, although no definitive
“solution” is necessarily forthcoming, making the case useful for discussion, whether in face-to-face or the virtual (internet) classroom. Cases in this category focus on a specific aspect of public administration such as leadership, ethics, or personnel/human resource management. Several micro-level cases, therefore, may be integrated into a single course, exposing students to a wide range of situations appropriate to particular subject matter areas and to well-identified principles of administration. Accordingly, micro-level cases may be best utilized in baccalaureate programs where students are pre-service—i.e., having little or no prior professional work experience. Callahan et al. (2005) present eighteen micro-level cases in their casebook, specifying a total of twenty-two topical areas where the cases may be used.

Macro-level cases are more complex, detailed and lengthy. Multiple actors are involved, often at various levels of government, some of whom interact directly with one another and others having little or no interaction, but nonetheless affected by their respective behaviors and decisions. The time period of macro-level cases are most often protracted over several months or years. The problems posed are numerous, intersecting and complex. The underlying issues are less clearly defined than in micro-level cases. Once unraveled, the issues tend to illustrate more than one principle or theory of public administration and in multi-faceted areas such as executive decision-making, intergovernmental relations or urban politics and administration. The teaching objective may go beyond identifying existing principles or theories illustrated in the case to an analysis of what contribution the case makes to the betterment or advancement of the field of public administration. Maximizing the potential of macro-level cases requires far more time and attention for both the instructor and students alike; therefore, fewer can be incorporated into a single course. Some highly complex macro-level cases can occupy the entire focus of a course. Accordingly, macro-level cases are most appropriately used in courses where students are in-service, mid-career professionals pursuing a graduate level degree. Among the sources of these types of case studies are Stillman (2004), The Electronic Hallway http://www.hallway.org and the Kennedy School of Government http://www.ksgcase.harvard.edu.

Both micro- and macro-level case studies also may be used effectively at any level as an instructional aid where the focus of teaching is a specific skill embodied in the course, such as those found in public budgeting, strategic planning or performance management.

Conclusive (closed-end) vs. inconclusive (open-ended). Another dichotomy of case study types is based on the extensiveness of the “story” detailed in the case, irrespective of whether the case is micro or macro in nature. Conclusive or closed-end case studies describe the outcome of the scenario being portrayed, with some going to the extent of providing an epilogue, revealing events following the story’s end. The reader benefits from full disclosure of the events surrounding the case. Depending upon the complexity of the case, several conclusions can be presented—e.g., the distinct decisions of multiple actors and the impacts of those decisions on those affected. From a pedagogical perspective, such cases pose numerous options for discussion.
Inconclusive or open-ended case studies leave the reader “hanging,” so to speak, with no decision or outcome being included as a part of the case. Such cases are often characterized by a “critical incident” at the case’s conclusion—e.g., a central decision-maker is confronted with a milestone or turning point event, left to the reader to decipher. McCallister (in Klein, 2002) points out that the critical incident lends itself to inductive assessment among students, leading to various alternatives and further discussion. Examples of inconclusive cases are found in Callahan et al. (2005) and Rhodes (2002). Although both types form the basis for class discussion, analysis and problem-solving, the inconclusive case study offers the opportunity for multiple approaches to be explored.

Factual vs. fictitious. The manner in which the cases are written represents yet a further means of categorization for instructional purposes. The distinction described here is fairly obvious and need not be elaborated upon extensively. Cases based on factual situations have the advantage of credibility from the reader’s perspective in that they are based on real life situations, whereas those that are fabricated may lack credibility and the quality necessary to be taken seriously. On the other hand, factual cases, if well-known, may have the disadvantage in an instructional setting of students being predisposed in one way or another to the decisions involved in the case. This pitfall can be overcome by instructors experienced in the case study method who emphasize objectivity and analysis, limiting emotional reactions that are bound to occur simply due to the gravity of the events embedded in the case. Examples in the United States include case studies based on disasters such as the crash of the Columbia spacecraft and the “9-11” terrorist attacks (both found in Stillman, 2004).

Fictional cases present a means for reducing such predispositions as do factual cases based on more obscure real life experiences that students have not been previously exposed to. Of course, some cases represent a hybrid of this dichotomy—i.e., founded on actual situations, but fictionalizing the locale and names of the key players involved in the case. Some of the specifics of the case may even be modified to reinforce or highlight a particular aspect of the case for teaching purposes. Examples are found in Garvey (1996).

Forms of Cases

For the teaching practitioner, a critical decision in determining whether to adopt the case study method is the form in which the case or cases will be incorporated in the course. Several options are available: isolated, integrated or “live” cases.

Isolated. Case studies are considered “isolated” if they are included in a course as separate and distinct from other material and viewed as supplementary to that material, although nonetheless related to the subject matter. Macro-level case studies often lend themselves to this form of case study. Instructors teaching a highly specialized course may choose a single, isolated case study as the focal point of the course. In doing so, significant preparation is required on the instructor’s part to develop teaching techniques in incorporating the isolated case into the course. Some sources of cases found in this form include “teaching notes” which contain suggestions for pedagogy based on
experience of the authors of the cases who have used them in their own classes. These notes may or may not be useful to the instructor, depending on many factors including educational objectives and teaching style. Sources of isolated cases are those noted earlier in the discussion of macro-level cases. Among other sources is Bergerson and Banyan (2005) who developed an annotated bibliography of case study resources for public administration, arranged by fourteen different subfields, such as budgeting/finance, international relations/management, information technology, performance management and leadership, many drawn from an internet site of the National Center for Public Productivity, Public Administration Teaching Roundtable at Rutgers University: http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~ncpp/roundtable/cases.htm

**Integrated.** In the integrated form, cases are inextricably linked to additional, supporting materials that are a component of the unit being taught. These materials may include introductory, explanatory information or relevant readings from the literature, or both. Such materials may be prepared either by the course instructor or editor of a casebook (e.g., Stillman, 2004). The case study(ies), however, remain the focal point of the course. Additional support may be available with integrated cases in the form of questions that the instructor may use as the basis for written assignments or in leading a class discussion. Case commentaries from “experts” in the field represent another form of support with integrated case studies. Following each case presented in Callahan, et al. (2005) commentaries are included from the perspectives of reviewers from three different cultures, demonstrating how the situation posed in the case might be handled in another country’s administrative system.

**Live.** The “live” case study is included here even though it departs significantly from types of cases described above. Kumar (in Klein, 2001) defines the live case as one in which “the student goes through a real life experience of interactive processes involved in decision making…” (p. 125). In live cases, the instructor provides sufficient information to orient the student to the problem at hand, and leaves it to the student’s discretion to identify and locate additional information toward the resolution of a problem or issue. The live case study method challenges students to identify requisite information and apply investigative, research and problem solving skills to the case. Students are also encouraged to further consult with the instructor, as necessary, although they are expected to initiate questions relevant to the elements of the case.

**Teaching Objectives, Approaches and Support**

An instructor contemplating the case study approach to teaching must clearly identify the teaching objective to be achieved in its use and define the approach to be taken with the case to maximize the students’ learning experience. Moreover, before embarking on the case study method, instructors should avail themselves of supporting resources.

**Teaching Objectives.** If the case study method is adopted with an international focus in mind, the case or cases chosen must reflect the underlying educational objective. For example, a the instructor should determine to what extent the case fulfilling a role of fostering multi-cultural education for multi-cultural education’s sake or if it is being
employed to broaden students’ perspectives so that they may gain an appreciation for approaches other than those with which they are familiar. Either or both objectives are relevant to preparing students for functioning effectively as public administrators in a globalized environment but not all cases can accomplish both objectives. Case studies have the potential for achieving multiple objectives, including stimulating or honing critical thinking, illustrating principles or theories, or introducing new dimensions to a topic area. Such objectives can be interconnected or stand alone in implementing the case study approach.

Also underscoring the need for clarity of the educational objective in the use of case studies is the potential for students to become so highly engaged in the elements and events within the case itself that they lose sight of the value of the case as a learning tool. Signs of this pitfall include a tendency to “assign blame” and an inability to transfer the administrative “lessons” to other settings. High profile cases are likely to have this effect. Once again, using the Hurricane Katrina and Columbia spacecraft disasters as examples, students are often inclined to identify a single “culprit” among the key players as a “quick fix” solution. They may also be inclined to limit their focus to the case’s context (such as disaster planning and space exploration) vs. broader implications in other administrative settings, applying concepts and principles from the discipline of public administration.

**Approaches and Support.** The task of identifying appropriate approaches to employing the case study method is inextricably linked to the educational objective. The instructor must choose an approach that leads to achieving the objective in the best possible manner. Among the approaches to incorporating case studies are written or oral communication formats, or both. Either approach may be incorporated in a traditional classroom setting or virtual (internet). Written assignments may include formal analysis based on specific instructions. To be effective in using this approach, the instructor must provide detailed feedback to the student, identifying strengths and weaknesses in the analysis and offering suggestions for improvement.

Oral communication may take the form of small or large group discussion, individual student presentations, or seminar format (not all mutually exclusive). It is incumbent upon the instructor to become familiar with facilitation skills in leading such communication techniques. Wood and Anderson (in Klein, 2001) advance pedagogical approaches to the art of instructor questioning in the case study method, noting that when appropriately applied, higher order cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis and reflection can be achieved.

Accordingly, instructors employing the case study method are challenged to keep current on new developments in this type of pedagogy through professional development channels—e.g., attendance at conferences and workshops and regular review of the literature. The World Association for Case Method Research and Application (WACRA) represents one organization focusing exclusively on this teaching strategy. Its aims are as follows:
• Explain, research and advance the use of the case method in teaching, planning and training at all levels
• Promote and encourage research using the case method, with special emphasis placed on studying the teaching effectiveness in varied teaching-learning systems
• Coordinate development of interactive pedagogical methods…
• Augment the available body of research and teaching materials
• Foster interdisciplinary applications
• Encourage cooperation with the public sector, the business community and other case method oriented professional specialties on a worldwide basis.

http://www.wacra.org (pp. 2-3, accessed 31 March 2006)

**International Comparative Perspective: Transfer of Cases Between Contexts**

The practical aspects of case study pedagogy become even more complex in a cross-national context, depending upon the type of international comparative perspective taken. This can occur in many forms, such as an international case taught mono-culturally, or across cultures in either traditional or virtual (internet) format. Although challenging, these aspects, once identified, can be addressed. Although not an exhaustive treatment, some key issues are described here: communication, teaching traditions and the text and context of the case studies themselves.

**Communication**

The issue of communication in cross-national context transcends language differences to address cultures and traditions between and among countries. For example, in an interactive experience between educators from the United States and Eastern Europe, Dudua, et al. (in Klein, 2001) reported the success of sharing content “…with the understanding that participants would use their own adaptation of … information and process, shaping their use in a way that would fit into the institutional culture in which they worked” (p. 96). This openness and flexibility reduced potential barriers to communication and exchange from the “our way is best” interpretation of material. This type of sensitivity to the impact of communication is of critical importance in the case study method in a cross-national context—i.e., recognizing that no one way is best. Moreover, failure to address this aspect of the experience renders the case study method counterproductive inasmuch as the value of the method lies in its ability to generate a variety of perspectives and creative solutions.

Dudua, et al. (in Klein, 2001) also reported on other communication-related factors as fostering or impeding the experience that can be applied to the case study method. Among these were the aspect of use of time in discussions, the extent to which participants were reluctant to share culture and creating a climate conducive to listening.

* The sources used in this section are from two WACRA conferences (Klein, 2001 and 2002). More detailed and extensive literature, primarily in the field of education, can be explored on the topics addressed here as well as others relevant to the discussion.
The U.S. participants were more concerned than their Eastern European counterparts to the efficient use of time. Similarly, they were less forthcoming in sharing aspects of the American culture than were the Eastern Europeans. These problem areas were identified and a common understanding was established to overcome their potential as barriers to communication. Cultural differences also posed a hazard to communication with respect to interactive processes involving listening and sharing of information, according to the authors. Firm ground rules were needed to equalize the opportunity for communication between and within the groups.

Teaching Traditions

The role of teaching traditions can affect the acceptability of the case teaching method in various cultures. Sadowsky and Blass (in Klein, 2001) examined the historical background of the French educational system’s *dictee* and elite institutions of learning/teaching style accustomed to the deductive method vs. the educational environment in other cultures where the inductive method is more easily adopted. They offer ten suggestions for overcoming the potential difficulties of transitioning to the case study approach; a few are summarized as follows:

- Adequately prepare for and introduce students to the case study method of teaching and learning:
  
  ...present the group with a challenge...prod them to experience the ‘strange’ classroom dynamic as an exercise in adaptability....use the argument that, in an age of globalization, we will all be asked to work in environments and with methods that may seem unusual... (p. 121).

- Manage class time creatively:
  
  ...the usual one-hour or 90-minute class is far too short to deal with a case in anything approaching comprehensiveness [accounting for] the contextual shock and the language barriers.... [W]e...found a 3-hour format to permit a much better discussion, a less ‘pushy’ approach by the discussion leader, and a more satisfactory sense of closure and understanding on the part of the students... (p. 122).

- Adapt the dynamics of a class setting’s intermingling of cultures:
  
  We often look to foreigners [in the class] to frame issues, provide perspective, and come up with unusual (i.e., non-French)...solutions.... This sort of insight can then be used to raise ethical and national culture questions as they affect a given case (p. 122).

The authors concluded that although frustrating for both instructors and students, the adaptation to the case study method proved rewarding and beneficial, noting the importance of exercising patience and sensitivity to cultural differences. Although their experience is based on teaching business management to a multi-cultural class, their observations can be applied to any discipline and any culture where reluctance to adopt the case method may be prevalent.
Text and Context

This aspect of using case studies in a cross-national context refers to the potential barrier posed by case elements that are unfamiliar to students. In reporting on a study aimed at addressing this problem, Vega-Carney (in Klein, 2001), describes the phenomenon as based on the premise that a given case provides the same learning experience for all students, when in fact this is not true in a multi-cultural setting; rather, the “authenticity” of the learning environment can be compromised when, for example, the context of a case on the health care system in the United States is used in a class with students who are being exposed to the uniqueness of the system for the first time. In such instances, what is lacking in the case is the successful transmission of “the symbols, rules, values, customs and practices employed in the particular environment in which the case takes place” (pp. 295 & 296).

Vega-Carney (in Klein, 2001) proposes an approach for the instructor to deal with this situation by conducting an “authenticity preview”—i.e., an assessment of the case to identify elements unique to the culture in which it is set. Following such a preview, the instructor devises a guide that clearly describes these elements, using it as a teaching tool to equalize the familiarity level of the case context for all students. The guide sets forth nuances of both meaning and context of the case, including terminology, and “culture,” in the sense of organizational and bureaucratic cultures that impact upon the students’ understanding of the case.

According to the author, this approach offers “…a simple, efficient, and proven technique to assure that the dialogue…is clear, objective and meaningful…. [I]t increases the foreign students’ level of comfort…the extent of involvement, and their acquisition of knowledge…(p. 301). To increase the cross-national application of case studies, such a guide might accompany the case itself rather than leaving it to the instructor to devise in its entirety on his or her own. Without a tool of this kind, instructors can be discouraged from considering the use of case studies that might well enhance the teaching/learning environment.

Another dimension of context in case study instruction is noted in Schroer-Lamont’s (in Klein, 2002) examination of cultural differences among students being taught in a cross-national setting. In a class of Norwegian and American university women who shared many cultural similarities, unexpected differences emerged with respect to students’ perceptions of gender issues in the workplace setting. Once these differences surfaced, the instructor was challenged to probe more deeply into the underlying societal causes and implications than anticipated when it was assumed that female students from both cultures held common views about gender issues. This experience points to the fact that cross-national differences may be more subtle than expected, pointing to the need for adaptability on the part of the instructor when divergent views emerge.
International Academic Cooperation: Roles for EGPA?

At best, the foregoing discussion represents only an overview of the case study method, its theoretical underpinnings and some of the practical issues associated with its application. A concluding observation based on this exploration is that the case study method presents a unique opportunity in public administration teaching to meet the challenges to the profession posed by globalization; yet, its effectiveness lies in insightfulness in its adoption and application. The rapid pace of globalization underscores the importance of formulating a professional support system to facilitate and expedite the case study method to maximize its value as a teaching method.

A key role for the European Group of Public Administration (EGPA) appears evident in this regard, consistent with the stated objectives of both the organization as a whole and its Study Group IX on Public Administration and Teaching (PAT). Of particular note is EGPA’s and PAT’s emphasis on exchange of ideas and experiences as well as strengthening and advancing relations with other groups of public administration professionals, to benefit from their expertise.

These same themes characterize an agreement between EGPA and the American Society for Public Administration’s (ASPA) American Consortium for International Public Administration. Among the aims of the Agreement are to “…foster comparative studies…, facilitate the application of corresponding innovative ideas…, organize and promote information exchanges…, and…set up permanent or occasional networks related to common research interests” (found at http://www.aspa.org). Also aligned with ASPA is its Public Administration Teaching Network (PATNET) which shares an interest in advancing effective methods of instruction in the field.

In advancing the role of the case study method in cross-national contexts, EGPA’s outreach to other disciplines and worldwide seems not only appropriate but essential. As noted in this paper, organizations such as WACRA and resources such as Electronic Hallway and others form the foundation for initiating and continuing dialogue as an active participant. Possible outcomes for consideration include co-sponsorship of workshops and conferences, design and dissemination of electronic and other resources, and identification of specific research areas in pedagogical approaches to case study use in cross-national settings.

The potential for effective case study teaching in the increasingly global environment of public administration is worthy of priority attention to capitalize on its unique quality: providing a vicarious experience for learning—i.e., a “laboratory” wherein actual decisions are played out, observed closely, analyzed and observed for drawing out the lessons of administration.
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