

CREATIVE TEACHING: USING THE CASE STUDY METHOD TO TEACH FUTURE TEACHERS HOW TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE IN TODAY'S CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

One of the major challenges confronting global public education is the teacher attrition rate with many of the brightest and best new teachers leaving the profession within three to five years. We have developed a teacher education program at our small four-year liberal arts college in western Pennsylvania that seems to have reversed this disturbing trend through integrating case study teaching methodology, field experiences, and the study of the theory of multiple intelligences throughout our course work.

KEY WORDS: Case studies, multiple intelligences, field experiences, teacher retention

INTRODUCTION

The International Herald Tribune in August of 2007 addressed the growing problem of “teacher turnover” reporting that “nearly a third of all new teachers leave the profession after just three years, and that after five years almost half are gone.”¹ President Thomas Carroll of the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future was quoted as saying, “Our schools are like a bucket with holes in the bottom, and we keep pouring in new teachers.”²

This problem is not unique to the United States. On a recent trip to England, Scotland, and Wales British teachers, and Education faculty and administrators from Colleges and Universities shared their concerns with me regarding teacher retention. BBC News noted in January 2003 that a third of England’s first year teachers quit within five years.³ Carol Adams chief executive of the General Teaching Council for England stated ‘those leaving the profession are often the most enthusiastic, positive, and creative teachers’.⁴ Her conclusion was supported by the International Handbook of Teachers and Teaching which noted, “Teaching has a high attrition rate, with the most dysfunctional attrition being the loss of high promising and high performing teachers.”⁵ The natural consequence of this may be seen in Germany, where only six percent of teachers work until the set retirement age.⁶ How to attract the brightest and the best to the teaching profession and prepare them to survive and thrive in the classroom is a daunting challenge

Our small liberal arts college in western Pennsylvania has been preparing people to teach for over two centuries.⁷ The last ten years our education department has managed not only to attract high academic and creative achievers to teaching, but also to reverse the national and international attrition rate plaguing the profession. Over the past decade less than three percent of our graduates have left teaching, and in the past five years all our graduates continue to teach.⁸ Our professors and graduates believe the incorporation of the case study method throughout our teacher education program has played a significant and integral role in keeping our new teachers in the classroom.⁹ Alumni have told us case studies with their accompanying educational internships provided them a firm grasp on what problems might arise in the classroom, what to expect from students, and how to reach and teach students.¹⁰ They

felt prepared to teach and told us case studies helped provide them the resources to connect educational theories with best classroom practice, and develop the critical thinking skills necessary to problem solve in the classroom.¹¹ Research indicates effective and successful teachers “always appear to be one step ahead of problems in the classroom, anticipating and preventing misbehavior.”¹² Our graduates regularly email, call or write to tell us one or more of the case studies we discussed helped them successfully meet the needs and challenges of their students.¹³

We believe the use of a variety of case studies helps our students in many ways, but three residual benefits in particular seem to be helping our graduates stay in the classroom and defy the high attrition rate of so many new teachers.

- Case studies seem to prepare our future teachers to expect the unexpected, and prepare themselves to deal professionally with the reality that classrooms and students are full of surprises, not all of them academic.¹⁴
- Case studies seem to help our future teachers recognize, respect, and expect that students learn in many different ways. They have learned to be proactive thinkers prepared to teach using differentiated instructional strategies and reach all students by using Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences and other creative teaching methodologies.¹⁵
- Case studies with accompanying class discussions and written reflections help our students improve communication and problem solving skills, subsequently building their personal and professional confidence.¹⁶

School districts often compliment us about the maturity, confidence, and problem solving skills of our interns, student teachers, and graduates. We believe providing our students with case studies help them personalize, humanize, and understand the students they teach, and recognize the many ways students learn. Their own creation of case studies in some classes based on their own field experiences we believe provides the foundation on which they build this maturity, confidence, and problem solving skills.¹⁷

Graduates frequently share stories about their disillusioned and discouraged friends from other colleges or universities leaving teaching because it was not what they expected.¹⁸ They ask those teachers, themselves, and our professors, “What did they expect teaching to be?” We believe, and our graduates continue to tell us, the use of case studies provided them a window into teaching that textbooks and educational theories could never offer.¹⁹ Case studies seem to help them find a healthy balance bridging the idealism that initially attracted them to teaching, and the critical thinking and communication skills necessary to meet the realities facing them in schools and classrooms.

Several types of case studies are used at different points of our program. At the Oxford University Round Table Conference held at the Rhodes – Mandela House in 2005, I noted:

*We believe that before we can think globally, we have to begin by thinking small. We try to initially connect our students’ lives to the larger global community by using the life stories of famous and sometimes infamous people talking about ideas that relate to our students today. We use case studies of leaders...to illustrate, enlarge and connect their experiences to the ideas and experiences of our students. It is an important first step to developing classrooms and communities without walls and to expand the awareness of our students toward a global society.*²⁰

For better or worse we live in an age of celebrity, and the initial cases presented to our students are celebrities who are presented with a brief social /academic biographical profile of their lives when they were students. Details of their academic successes and failures are told culminating in a school problem and / or challenge these individuals actually faced in the classroom. They provide a human face for their geographic corner of the world.²¹

In our Geography for Teachers class, students must select four women and four men from areas studied and create a case study for each showcasing his or her academic problems, learning profiles, and final intellectual mastery.²² Students may use text from our own curriculum library such as *Unbowed: A Memoir* by Wangari Maathai²³ or *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Perspectives From His Correspondence*²⁴ to create their own case studies. Students may also select individuals from a list provided them that includes such names as: Hannah Hoch the influential Da Da photomontagist artist from Germany, Isabel Allende noted Chilean author, Helen Keller deaf and blind author activist from the United States, Akira Kurosawa award winning Japanese filmmaker, Srinivasa Ramanujan brilliant Indian mathematician, and Nelson Mandela the charismatic, yet peace leader and reconciliation builder from South Africa.

In the Foundations of American Education class twenty-five case studies are used throughout the semester focusing on actual classroom problems presidents and first ladies of the United States faced as students.²⁵ The situations are factual and open ended, selected to present challenges that students continue to experience. Some of these future White House residents had teachers who recognized their classroom problems as teachable moments, others did not.²⁶ Follow up class discussions by our professors guide students through possible scenarios of how to deal effectively with such problems.²⁷

Our Educational Psychology course also uses case studies as they are presented in two of the required texts that view prospective students through a gender lens, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of Adolescent Girls*²⁸, and *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*.²⁹

Since our students plan to teach at the elementary, middle school, junior high or high school levels in different academic subjects, taken together these diverse case studies present a variety of interdisciplinary academic, social and behavior problems from early primary grades through high school. Some deal with the socio-economic impediments to gaining an education [Wangari Maathai] others deal directly with academic problems such as the high achieving female student forced to change her career goal of being a doctor or scientist because of disappointing math and science grades [Hillary Clinton].³⁰

Some of our case studies focus on academic problems indirectly in an attempt to teach our students that the social and emotional needs of a child may checkmate sabotage or detour the best-laid plans of even the most dedicated teacher. Presenting problems range from the academic and social ramifications of Mozart's emotional outbursts and hyperactivity³¹ to a middle school girl bully deciding which girl would be frozen out and ignored by others on the school bus and playground [Barbara Bush].³²

Our case studies are designed to teach that "problem" students can still have the talents, skills and potential to be successful.³³ We use these studies to illustrate the point that a teacher who only views students through an academic lens is bound for frustration and failure.³⁴ We use these case studies to help open the minds and hearts of our future teachers so they can better teach the whole child.³⁵

The case studies used in our Geography course and Foundations of American Education course are also used to introduce our students to the theory of multiple intelligences.³⁶ Howard Gardner first introduced me to this theory when he was my professor in graduate school. Since that time Gardner has authored over twenty books translated into twenty-six languages and has become internationally recognized for his contributions to teaching and learning.³⁷ He was recently awarded an Honorary Doctor of Education degree at South Korea's Han Yang University marking the twentieth such honorary degree he has received from colleges and universities on three continents.³⁸ Case studies in Geography present eight diverse learners from the international stage representing one or more of the multiple intelligences set forth in Howard Gardner's theory.³⁹

Case studies featuring students who later grew up to become presidents and first ladies of the United States as representatives of one or more of the multiple intelligences are used in our introductory level Foundations of Education course. One of the course text books used in that class explains, "Although the effort to recognize broader more inclusive definitions of intelligence is hardly unique to Gardner, his theory is especially powerful because he uses a rich research base that gives credence to his work. Among the wide range of fields from which Gardner culls his data are anthropology, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, biographical studies, psychometrics, physiology, and neurology. In addition, he used a stringent system of criteria through which a skill, talent, or mental capacity has to pass before it can be identified as true intelligence."⁴⁰

Our students and alumna have told us the incorporation of the theory of multiple intelligences into case studies has expanded their sensitivity and awareness about the complexity of human intelligence and the need to be creative in engaging young minds.⁴¹ We frequently quote former president Bill Clinton who wrote, "Young people learn in different ways".⁴² We believe these case studies and the teaching of the multiple intelligences personalizes that statement. Since there are many ways to learn and be smart, there must be many ways to teach.⁴³

Field experiences are an essential part of our education program. Each and every education class has an internship at a local school where our students serve as teacher aides and tutors.⁴⁴ Prior to working directly with students, interns must learn the names of all the students in the class and analyze how each learns best. Learning modalities, learning styles, and the multiple intelligences are identified and evaluated through observations and subsequent interactions.⁴⁵ Internships are required of all our students at all grade levels, so at some point future elementary school teachers will work with secondary students and future secondary school teachers will intern at one or more elementary schools. Our future

teachers are taught to look at, respect, understand, and teach to the whole child in as many different creative ways and educational settings as possible. These field experiences are used to build confidence, and communication and teaching skills to prepare our future teachers to be successful in their own classrooms, with their own students, despite the maturity or academic ability of whomever they teach.

Our students write weekly memos based on every internship visit. The memos (without using student, teacher, or school names) describe observed scenarios of actual classroom situations.⁴⁶ Interns evaluate and explain if they were teaching the class, whether or not they would teach the lesson in the same way and handle any students or problems differently.⁴⁷ A rationale must be given based on their knowledge of the students and how those students learn.

If no clear conclusions can be reached, the memo ends with a presenting problem other education class students are asked to resolve in class. Interns therefore create their own case studies and are given class time to present the problem and lead a discussion on what to do and how to do it. This gives them practical practice writing, teaching, leading discussions, and problem solving.⁴⁸

Case studies presented to our students, teaching the theory of multiple intelligences, follow up class discussions, written reflections, and connections of these components to field experiences, along with student created case studies are used to provide experience and build confidence, as well as develop communication and problem solving skills. Our students are taught to look beyond the surface of the classroom, beyond the difficult student's behavior or seeming lack of motivation and ask, "How does this student learn best?"⁴⁹ They are encouraged to ask the right questions and come up with appropriate professional answers and solutions. Each success with a student, with a lesson, and with a class builds confidence, confidence we believe helps our teachers survive and thrive in the classroom, and remain in teaching. We believe the foundation for much of the success we experience in training future teachers, and keeping them in the classroom can be attributed to our regular creative use of case studies imbedded throughout our teacher education program.

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