‘TRYING OUR OWN MEDICINE’:
THE CASE METHOD OF INSTRUCTION IN THE
UNITED STATES IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The case method of instruction has a long past, but a short history. Focusing on work in the United States accomplished prior to the surge of interest in the case method of instruction that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, this article attempts to inform on applications of the case method by explaining the case method in historical perspective. A further goal is to recover selected possible “lessons” in the form of themes that emerge from the professional education literature that recent advocates of the case method of instruction have tended to overlook.

KEY WORDS: History of case method of instruction, legal education, medical education, business education, K-12 education

INTRODUCTION

During the 20th-century, in the United States, the case method of instruction became a staple of professional training in many fields. Much advocacy of the case method typically begins with a nod to the origins of the method in legal and business education. Occasionally an obscure precedent is acknowledged, seemingly for literary effect. Only in rare instances have educators in the professions attempted to derive lessons from past experience with cases. Moreover, efforts to build upon professional knowledge about cases are almost nonexistent. Even scholars who have attended to precedents to the late 20th-century surge of interest in the case method, such as Doyle [1990], Merseth [1991a], Kagan [1993], McAninch [1993], and Lynn [1999], often have overlooked important work. Indeed, no comprehensive history of the case method exists. As such, much previous work with and writing about the case method of instruction remains untapped by latter day advocates.

This article attempts 1) to explain the case method in the United States in historical perspective and 2) to recover selected pertinent aspects of the professional education literature that recent advocates have disregarded. In order to provide a historical perspective, this article focuses on work accomplished prior to the surge of interest in the case method of instruction that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. To accomplish these goals, this article recounts the origins of the case method in legal, medical, and business education in the United States, examines the use of the case method by educators in K-12 schooling and in pre-service teacher education programs. It also briefly reviews use of the case method in other fields.
ORIGINS OF THE CASE METHOD IN LEGAL, MEDICAL, AND BUSINESS EDUCATION

The legitimacy of the common claim that the case method of instruction originated in legal, medical, and business education in the United States resides in the reality that these fields systematically implemented the method as a component part of the preparation of their respective professionals. Other fields, while occasionally exploring and employing the method sometimes even earlier than these three fields, ultimately employed the method sporadically and incompletely. Thus, while during the 19th-century the sociologist William Graham Sumner [Sperle, 1933] and the principal of the Oswega Normal School [Doyle, 1990; Sheldon, 1864] apparently utilized variations of the case method before it was established in other professions, the method never prevailed in these fields to the extent that it prevailed in law, medicine and business.

THE CASE METHOD IN LEGAL EDUCATION

The case method of instruction effectively originated during the 19th-century in legal education [Llewellyn, 1937; Hurst, 1950; Friedman, 1973; Stevens, 1983]. Prior to the 1870s, aspiring attorneys typically received their training through a clerkship, at a local proprietary law school unaffiliated with a university, or through a combination of both. During the second half of the 19th-century, formal study at a law school increasingly became the preferred form of preparation for the bar. At this time, law schools began affiliating with universities, as well. Among law schoolteachers, lectures and textbook recitation prevailed as the instructional methods of choice. During the 1860s, however, one John Norton Pomeroy taught small law seminars at New York University through reading and discussion of cases [Hurst, 1950]. While Pomeroy confined this unorthodox method to individual courses, the credit for expanding the case method to the whole law curriculum falls to Christopher Columbus Langdell of Harvard University.

Within one year of becoming president of Harvard in 1869, Charles W. Eliot hired Langdell as professor of law and, in the same year, appointed Langdell to the deanship of the fledgling law school [Friedman, 1973]. Langdell initiated a number of changes to the existing program, including rigorous admission requirements and a mandatory sequence of courses lasting 3 years, which ultimately would define the 20th-century law school in the United States. Among the innovations that Langdell introduced to legal education, the case method of instruction was paramount.

For Langdell, the case method of instruction was the only acceptable method of instruction. Prior to his appointments at Harvard, Langdell’s interest and experience had been not in practice of the law, but in study of the law. For Langdell, law was a science, the fundamental principles of which could be derived from specific cases. The case method of instruction involved students in intensive study of a series of cases, assembled in a casebook, which collectively illustrated basic legal principles. In the classroom, dogmatic lectures were replaced by Socratic discussion and analysis of case law.

As with any educational change that departs from time worn tradition, Langdell’s case method of instruction met sustained resistance. As one legal historian put it, “The students were bewildered; they cut Langdell’s classes in droves; only a few remained to hear him out” [Friedman, 1973, p. 533]. Not only did students drop from Langdell’s classes, but enrollments in the law school dwindled, as well. For Langdell’s method suffered from both pedagogical and curricular shortcomings.

With respect to the content of the law, Langdell’s focus on judicial and common law at the neglect of legislative and executive law was abominable to his fellow legal educators. Pedagogically, Langdell’s method, especially when employed systematically throughout the entire program of study, sacrificed breadth for depth of coverage. As late as 1893, the American Bar Association attacked the case method on these and other grounds [Stevens, 1983]. Yet, Langdell persisted. The long-term success of his reforms was due in part to his political and promotional efforts (and also to Eliot’s). Of his students who persevered, he hired some onto the Harvard faculty and sent others off to establish the case method at rival prestigious law schools. Although controversy over the case method continued in legal education circles, by the early 20th-century, the method had become firmly entrenched in law curricula as the “Harvardization” of American law schools. Other professions, perhaps enamored with the prestige associated with this hallmark of legal education, began adapting the case method to their professional training.
Reflecting his experience and preferences, Langdell’s conception of the case method was expressly theoretical and academic. The actual nuts and bolts practice of law was of no concern to Langdell and had no bearing on his case method. Langdell’s exclusively academic approach to the law established a precedent that was emulated by prestigious law schools such as those at Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Michigan. Langdell’s theoretical approach to the case method enhanced the prestige of law as it organized itself into a profession. As such, the case method played a key role in elevating law from the status of trade to that of profession. Many of the disputes over the case method were centered on the tension between theoretical and practical priorities in legal preparation. In legal education, the case method exalted theoretical, academic priorities over practical concerns.

Unlike the origins of the case method in legal education, the case method won favor in medical and business education for its decidedly practical value. In these fields, the case method was lauded as a vehicle for at least introducing a practical “real world” dimension to otherwise highly “academic” studies and, at best, for bridging the gulf between theory and practice.

THE CASE METHOD IN MEDICAL EDUCATION

The medical education iteration of the case method took form in the clinical phase of professional preparation. Like preparation for legal practice, during the 17th-, 18th-, and into the 19th-century, prospective physicians in America typically served an apprenticeship with a practicing physician, reading the few medical treatises available and assisting with patient care to varying degrees [Thorne, 1973; Kaufman, 1980; Rothstein, 1987]. Those of affluence could afford to study at European medical schools and/or hospitals. During the 19th century, medical education in the United States became increasingly formalized while simultaneously remaining characterized by a variety of training options. Although apprenticeships and proprietary schools remained options, the number of medical schools affiliated with universities and hospitals increased significantly. From four medical schools around 1800, the number increased to 47 by 1860 and to around 160 by 1900 [Thorne, 1973, pp. 18-19; Rothstein, 1987, p. 49].

In addition to engaging in academic study of anatomy and pathology, with physiology, chemistry, and other sciences added to the curriculum later in the century, medical students enrolled in clinical courses, which were usually conducted as lectures [Brieger, 1980]. Over time, clinical experiences expanded from lectures to demonstrations, and later to observation of physicians on their rounds in hospitals. Erasmus Darwin Fenner, Professor and Dean at the New Orleans School of Medicine, influenced by European medical school practices, was probably the first professor of medicine in the United States to incorporate the clinical clerkship into the training of physicians [Atwater, 1980]. William Oster of Johns Hopkins University, however, is credited with transforming the formalized clinical clerkship, in which students worked closely, under the supervision of a physician, with a half dozen patient “cases” in local hospitals, into a standard fixture of American medical education [Atwater, 1980; Rothstein, 1987]. Oster had criticized the lecture-based clinical practices of the late 19th century. He claimed that the lab work in sciences classes was more practical than the clinical lectures.

Abraham Flexner in fact based the recommendations published in his influential 1910 report about medical education on the Johns Hopkins model developed by Oster. Flexner [1910] recommended stricter admissions standards, a full-time medical faculty, and university affiliation, among other things, for all medical schools. His recommendations most relevant to the case method, however, were those that called for a course sequence of two years of basic science followed by two years of clinical experiences. Flexner’s recommendations were widely adopted, and became the dominant model of medical education in the 20th century [Thorne, 1973; Rothstein, 1987].

Although the clinical experience increasingly became hospital-based and patient-focused and involved increased student contact with patients, criticism continued. Into the 1950s, for example, lectures continued to dominate the clinical experience [Atwater, 1980]. Even after the lecture lost its dominance, too often the type of patients medical students came in contact with were atypical of the kinds of patients most practicing physicians attended [Rothstein, 1987]. Moreover, the articulation between two years of basic science and two years of clinical experience was inadequate, if it existed at all [Blake, 1980]. In the 1990s, Irby [1994] identified an over-reliance on sheer presentation of information, a failure to accommodate learners’ individual differences, and a failure substantively to engage learners in the clinical experience as shortcomings of the clinical phase of medical training. While the case method became a fixture of professional training in medicine, controversy over its implementation continued.
THE CASE METHOD IN BUSINESS EDUCATION

Like medical training, business education conceived the case method as a practical, applied alternative to narrower academic studies. Like legal training, the case method in business education originated at Harvard University.

When the Harvard Business School opened in 1908, its organizers intended that it would follow the example of the Harvard Law School and feature the case method of instruction. Indeed, by that time business leaders had come to consider law school as appropriate training for business. The implementation of the case method at the Harvard Business School was, however, a gradual affair. Edwin F. Gay, first Dean of the Harvard Business School, had used cases from the law school in the economic history course he taught at Harvard College. Under Gay’s leadership, the case method, using cases from the law school, was employed in the Commercial Law course in the business school. The method moved beyond law school cases when in 1912 the Business Policy course included business practitioners as guests who were invited to present a practical problem for students to resolve [Copeland, 1954]. Cases were next added to the Marketing course. During the 1920s, under the leadership of Dean Wallace B. Durham, the Harvard Business School began the systematic collection of cases from actual business experiences. Like Dean Gay, Dean Donham derived his conception of the case method from the law school, maintaining that through study of particular business cases, students would identify general underlying principles of business practice [Donham, 1931]. According to Greenwood [1983], however, the case method did not serve as the dominant mode of instruction until 1938. In 1945, the first undergraduate course at Harvard that relied heavily on the case method was launched. Later manifestations of the case method at Harvard Business School include Andrews [1953] and Barnes, et al. [1994].

The goal of employing the case method at the Harvard Business School was to promote active participation and active thinking among students, and to connect classroom experience to the “real world” of business practice. Often defined against traditional didactic methods that emphasized the accumulation of a vast store of information, in business education the case method was intended to foster thinking and promote student interest. Depth of understanding was preferred over breadth of knowledge [Fraser, 1931].

In 1958 advocates of the case method in business education founded the Southern Case Writers Association. Numerous foundation grants, writing workshops, published case books, and several name changes later, in 1978 the Case Research Association assumed its current title, indicating the national interest in the case method. In 1980 the Case Research Journal was inaugurated [Tate, 1983], perhaps signaling the institutionalization of the case method as a means of professional training in business.

THE CASE METHOD IN K-12 EDUCATION

During the 20th-century, interest in the case method of instruction on the part of K-12 educators and teacher educators in the United States was steady, but not overwhelming. In the professional literature, educators extolled the benefits of the case method for teaching school subjects and for training teachers and administrators. During the 1980s and 1990s, the possibilities of the case method of instruction received renewed attention from teacher educators, although many notable previous efforts were overlooked [e.g., Shulman & Colbert, 1989; Broudy, 1990; Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1993]. As in other fields, the case method literature in the field of education is long on description and advocacy and short on research. A brief historical overview of this literature follows.

THE CASE METHOD AND SCHOOL SUBJECTS

Educators have long identified the case method as a suitable instructional strategy for school subjects. In an early example, Haight [1915] discussed applications of the case method to teaching hygiene and preventive medicine to sixth-grade students. In addition to providing an effective, if grisly, example of a case of the prevention of varicose veins, Haight emphasized the distinction between the teacher’s use of a “case” for purposes of illustration, and student analysis of a case for the purpose of
forming judgments and applying knowledge. Haight [1915] described a key advantage of the case method in this way:

*Not only do the pupils get the knowledge they need, but they encounter it exactly as they do in later life. The viewpoint is the viewpoint of actual life and experience. Knowledge gained from that viewpoint can be applied.* [p. 508]

Haight’s essay shows an early manifestation of several themes discussed above, namely the value of the case method in relating subject knowledge to life, in promoting active participation of students in learning, and in developing thinking skills including problem diagnosis and resolution.

Some educators seemed interested in capitalizing on the positive associations of the case method with the prestige of the fields of law and medicine. Greenan [1930], for example, despite the title of his article, only mentioned cases in passing and in connection with legal education, suggesting that the social issues in a Problems of Democracy course presented “cases” for students to examine. Others articulated detailed rationales and descriptions of using case studies in school classrooms. Fitzsimons [1953] traced the origins of the case method to legal education, touted the realism and opportunities for student analysis it added to classroom experiences, and recognized the emergent nature of classroom experience. Fitzsimons held that the case method was generally appropriate “in the upper classes of high schools and colleges” [p. 102]. Morasky [1966] identified increased student participation and interest and opportunities for analysis and critical thinking as advantages of the case method and called for the collection of cases. In a rare instance of a school-based research study of the case method, Oliver and Baker [1959] considered the case method as a bridge between subject matter concepts and personal experience. They reported on a study that employed cases to teach labor history. In a comparison of control and experimental groups of high school students, they found the latter to exhibit improved knowledge, ability to distinguish fact from opinion, and favorable attitudes toward labor. Oliver and Baker called for further research and for the collection of history-related cases.

**THE CASE METHOD AND TEACHER EDUCATION**

The use of case methods in the pre-service education of teachers has been advocated intermittently since the 1920s. Perhaps ironically, 90 years ago both the President of Harvard University and the faculty of the new Harvard Graduate School of Education deemed the case method inappropriate for the training of educators [Merseth, 1991b]. President Lowell believed that knowledge about education was more likely to emerge from widespread statistical studies, while the faculty maintained that more attention should be devoted to developing the ability to implement decisions than to merely making decisions [Powell, 1980]. Although Harvard Graduate School of Education eventually embraced the case method in both educational administration [Sargent & Belisle, 1955] and teacher education [Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1993] programs, other universities enjoy the distinction of having set precedents in this area. William P. Burris, Dean of the College of Education at the University of Cincinnati, pioneered the use of the case method in teacher education [Gullahorn, 1959]. Burris’s [1922] clarion call to teacher educators warrants quoting at length:

> The time has come when those of us who are responsible for the training of teachers should try our own medicine. Too long have we given courses of lectures for the purpose of showing the futility of the lecture method. Too many are the textbooks which we have written in condemnation of the textbook method. It is time to make provision for the more adequate study of the thing itself about which we have been lecturing and on which we have been writing. [p. 121, emphasis in original]

Burris argued that the inclusion of teacher education in the university could be justified only insofar as teaching is treated as a science and, further, that teaching can be taught as a science only through the case method. For Burris [1922], the case method “is scientific because it is an objective and inductive study of the thing itself” [p. 124]. No doubt, many late-20th century educational researchers working from a postpositivist perspective would balk at Burris’s justification for both the university status of teacher education and the employment of the case method in teacher education. His proposals for the case method, however, were harbingers for the literature that followed, both in education and in other fields. Burris [1923] for example, recognized the value of introducing concrete school situations and
opportunities for students to develop skills of analysis into the teacher education classroom. Burris [1922] proposed that the case method should be complemented with other instructional strategies and insisted that it could not substitute for direct observation of classroom environments. He described contemporary efforts to use the case method in teaching educational psychology and other teacher preparation courses and broached the problem of insufficient case materials, as well as efforts, such as those of Thomas Hosic, to collect cases. Again, for Burris [1923], since the case method required students to analyze real situations, the “case method, therefore, is the scientific method” [p. 284].

Anderson, Barr, and Bush [1925], of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the University of Wisconsin, devoted three chapters of their insightful guide to the improvement of classroom instruction to an examination of case studies of teaching. Although the book was aimed at superintendents, principals, supervisors, and “critic teachers,” the authors maintained that classroom teachers could benefit from it as well. Anderson, Barr, and Bush [1925] presented concrete cases of classroom instruction from grades two through eight, including stenographic reports of individual lessons, for diagnosis and discussion. Similarly, Waples [1927] organized his book on resolving classroom problems around 42 cases that he collected from teachers enrolled in graduate courses taught at Teachers College, Columbia University during the summer session of 1926 and shortly thereafter from teachers in graduate courses at the University of Chicago. Waples categorized the cases into general problem areas, such as “Problems in the Presentation of Subject Matter,” “Problems in the Routine of Class Management,” and “Problems Arising from the Teacher’s Personal Traits.” Waples sought to familiarize interested professionals with common classroom problems and possible resolutions. In this context, Waples [1927] saw case analysis as a bridge between theory and practice:

It is frequently as possible to derive efficient methods for a given situation from established principles of good teaching as from a complete [and necessarily general] list of teaching and learning activities compiled by job analysis. It is also frequently possible to derive significant principles from the detailed analysis of a given case as from the more extensive and less specific data obtained from many cases. [pp.ix-x]


In a notable effort to benefit from previous work with the case method, McAninch [1993] pointed to another early application of the case method in teacher education in her discussion of Sperle’s 1933 study of the collection of cases from practicing teachers at New Jersey State Teachers College (NJSTC) (now Montclair State University). Sperle [1933], who was a member of the NJSTC faculty, opened her study with a historical overview of the use of cases in law, medicine, sociology, psychology, and education. She documented that cases were typically used in education as case histories of individual students, rather than as a classroom instructional technique. (Interestingly, Sperle made no mention of Burris’s work.) In 1925, NJSTC began collecting cases from student teachers. The use of cases there, however, was slightly different than the use typically discussed in the professional literature of education and other fields. Student teachers were asked to identify and prepare a report of problems they encountered in their practice teaching. Methods of collection and recording included completion of specially designed reporting cards [the format of which underwent several modifications] and student diaries. Students discussed the problems they encountered both in groups of student teachers and individually with a faculty advisor. While Burris previously, and most advocacy of the case method subsequently, emphasized the classroom use of cases to familiarize students with the circumstances of practice, the NJSTC project centered on student identification and resolution of particular problems encountered in the course of practice teaching. Thus, students were engaged in site-based problem solving; student teachers were to function as problem finders and problem solvers. Sperle cited Waples and Tyler’s [1929] recommendations for teacher problem solving. Although hundreds of cases were collected, McAninch [1993] indicated that to what use these cases were later put remains unknown.

Of the numerous precedents to the late 20th-century renewal of interest in the case method among teacher educators, the following deserve note. Brackenbury [1959], emphasizing an inductive approach,
presented eight case studies of practical educational problems for the experienced teacher to analyze from the perspective of various educational philosophies. Ladd and Sayers [1962] identified six distinct uses of cases and assembled 22 cases that focused on sociological, political, and legal issues. Greenwood, Good, and Siegel [1971] outlined a strategy for applying theories of educational psychology to making decisions about practical classroom problems and offered 20 “problem situations” or cases for study. Greenwood and Parkay [1989] presented 30 cases for analysis and decision making, several of which appeared in the Greenwood, Good, and Siegel [1970] volume. Greenwood and Parkay [1989] included nine cases devoted to the middle level. These works, and others [Graham & Cline, 1980; Boyce, 1992; McWilliam et al., 1996] manifest many of the themes identified in the case literature above.

In a final notable precedent, Hunter [1964] recognized the origins of the case method in legal education and its subsequent adoption in other fields and observed, “the case method is particularly well suited to the preparation of practitioners in a variety of professions” [p. 195]. Hunter [1964] recognized as an advantage that the case method can “avoid the theoretical level which is unrelated to reality” [p. 195]. Hunter touted the value of the case method for developing thinking and emphasized that cases are best approached with no predetermined solution sought by the instructor. She recommended using the case method not only with pre-service teachers, but also with cooperating teachers, in staff development of in-service teachers, and with present and prospective supervisors, administrators, and teacher educators. Like others, Hunter recommended against exclusive use of the case method at the expense of other appropriate strategies.

Investigation of the use of the case method at the University of Cincinnati and Montclair State University during the first half of the 20th-century could be instructive. Neither specialized histories of these projects nor an adequate general history of the case method of instruction is available to teacher educators today. In fact, the tendency of educators to turn a blind eye to the work of their predecessors is manifest in late twentieth century interest in the case method. Most of the literature discussed in this chapter, including Burris’s pioneering work, is not cited in the late twentieth century work discussed below. For years, Burris’ [1922] clarion call for teacher educators to employ the case method largely fell on deaf ears.

The attention devoted to evaluating the effectiveness of the case method of instruction in teacher education, as in other fields, is disproportionate to the attention devoted to promoting the method. The first three editions of the Handbook of Research on Teaching [Gage, 1963; Travers, 1973; Wittrock, 1986], for example, devoted no attention to the case method of instruction. Perhaps the surge of interest in the case method of instruction during the 1980s and 1990s will yield further examination of the effectiveness of the method.

THE UBIQUITOUS CASE METHOD

Following the origins of the case method in the United States in legal, medical, business education, and its early use in K-12 education, by mid-century the practice had begun migrating to other fields, including educational administration during the 1940s [Culbertson, et al., 1960; also Welker, 1929]. By the late 20th-century, professional preparation programs for virtually every established and emerging field utilized the case method to some extent. The case method was increasingly used to teach academic disciplines on both the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well [e.g., Donham, 1949; Hunt, 1951; Gullahorn, 1959; Conant & Nash, 1966].

While most of the literature about the case method pertains to legal and business education, as one might expect given the history of the method, hundreds of articles and books about employing the case method in a myriad of fields have been published. In addition to law, medicine, business, and K-12 education, fields that have employed the case method in professional education include: accounting; adult education; archival training; theology; public health administration; psychology; architectural management; library science; philosophy (especially ethics); social work; marketing geography; and comparative education. Most of the literature about the case method is descriptive or promotional. Five themes emerge from an examination of the literature about the use of the case method in fields other than law, medicine, business, and education that appeared before the 1980s. These themes can perhaps inform efforts to implement the case method of instruction in any professional education program.

SKILL DEVELOPMENT
The potential of the case method of instruction for developing thinking skills, especially in the areas of problem solving and decision-making, is the prominent theme in the literature devoted to the case method [Applebaum, 1961; Pointer & Ljungdahl, 1973; Durant, 1976; Mitchell, 1981]. Schaffer’s [1958] suggestion that the case method’s potential for teaching a “logical manner of thinking” [p. 487] is more important than its utility for imparting a body of knowledge is typical. Castore and Berrien [1950] touted the case method as a means of developing both an understanding of and an ability to apply principles of psychology. Pigors and Pigors [1954] claimed that a principal aim of the case method is to combine reason, appreciation, and practical judgment. Sattler [1958] viewed the case method as appropriate for teaching problem solving. Blouin [1978] claimed “the method can develop the ability to think through archival problems in a systematic and intelligent manner” [p. 43]. The ability to apply specialized knowledge and to exercise problem solving and decision-making skills are hallmarks of the case study method of instruction.

**PUPIL PARTICIPATION**

A second theme involves the advantages of the case study for promoting active student participation in classroom experiences [Mitchell, 1981]. Pointer and Ljungdahl [1973] noted that when applied to the teaching of accounting, the case method facilitated “the instructor’s efforts to organize the class work so that a high level of student participation was encouraged” [p. 615]. Sattler [1958] found the same benefit in a survey of college instructors of discussion methods. McWilliam [1992] identified “active student participation” as a “key element” of the case method. Pigors and Pigors [1954] put it simply when they noted that the case method promotes “learning by doing” [p. 8].

**REAL-WORLD APPLICATIONS**

The opportunity to relate specialized academic or professional knowledge to real life comprises a third theme in the case study literature. Holt [1928] noted, “The ‘case method’ in teaching is nothing but a device for bringing actual life situations into the classroom” [p. 208]. Writing about his specialized field, Blouin [1978] noted that the case method provided for the “practical application of archival principles” [p. 41]. McWilliam [1992], too, identified “the use of real-life situations” as a “key element of the case method of instruction.

**SITUATIONAL CASES**

A fourth theme, one that appears with less frequency than the aforementioned themes, recognizes the role of the case method in communicating to students the situational uniqueness of cases. While the case method was frequently celebrated for its inductive value, where general principles would be induced from particular cases, some advocates saw the case method revealing the idiosyncratic nature of experience. Schaffer [1958], for example, saw the case method as a way to encourage students to generate “solutions relative to the individual situation” [p.488]. Durant [1976], too, emphasized that the aim of the case method was neither to transmit new information to nor to predict typical problems for the student, but rather to develop the ability to generate specific solutions to concrete problems that emerge only from an analysis of a particular situation.

**COMPLEMENTARY METHODS**

As a fifth theme, literature about the case method often recommends against cases comprising the whole or, even, most of an educational program [Schaffer, 1958; Pointer and Ljungdahl, 1973]. Descriptions of case method teaching typically involve a number of instructional methods, including short lectures (or “lectureettes,” as they were sometimes called) to provide context, background readings, individual and/or group analysis of cases, and presentations and whole class discussions of interpretations of cases [Belding, 1958; Pointer and Ljungdahl [1973]; Mitchell, 1981]. Indeed, the need to employ several instructional methods when considering cases has even led to some confusion in terminology. In a study of “star” business faculty, Argyris [1980] found that lectures, role-playing,
simulations, films, and discussions were all employed to explore the ramifications of cases, but that, “Most of the faculty members interviewed believed that all of these teaching modes represented the case method” [p. 291]. Whether this perception was due to a lack of systematic reflection on the nature of the educational situation, or was a result of the habit of utilizing a variety of methods, was unclear. In any event, the imperative of using a variety of instructional strategies is an age-old educational principle that applies as well to the case method as to other strategies.

RESEARCH ON THE CASE METHOD OF INSTRUCTION

Interest in the case method on the part of educators in the professions in the United States eventually inspired efforts to evaluate the instructional effectiveness of the method. A handful of studies and two research reviews shed light on the effectiveness of the method.

Two reviews of research reveal the state of knowledge about the case method prior to the boom of the 1980s and 1990s. (Neither of these reviews included the Oliver and Baker [1959] study mentioned below.) Gullahorn [1959] briefly reviewed the findings of seven studies. Three studies found no significant difference between students taught under the case method and the lecture method with respect to knowledge attainment; one study found greater interpersonal skills among case method students compared to students with no case method experiences; two studies found student discomfort with the “unstructured” nature of the classroom routine under the case method; one study found significant improvement in both knowledge acquisition and attitude toward the classroom in case method students. Gullahorn [1959] concluded that the “results of the more formal attempts at evaluating the case-discussion method of instruction do not lead to clear-cut, uniform conclusions” [p. 459]. Combined with informal feedback from instructors who employed the case method, Gullahorn suggested that the findings of these studies warranted further empirical research into the effects of the case method of instruction.

Beckman [1972] prepared a general evaluation of the rationale for and the research on the case method. Like many before him, Beckman recognized real world applications, discussion focus, emphasis on student participation, and opportunities for analysis and decision making as key elements of the case method. Beckman reviewed seventeen studies (some investigating multiple outcomes) that pertained to the case method, although a number of them focused on comparing the lecture and discussion method without consideration of the use of cases. Four of the studies reviewed by Beckman [1972] had been reviewed by Gullahorn [1959]. With respect to the acquisition of information Beckman reported that two studies found the case method superior to the lecture, seven found no difference, and two found the lecture superior to the case method. With respect to retention of information, two studies found the case method superior. With respect to developing higher-order thinking skills, five studies found the case method superior and one found no difference between the case method and the lecture. Beckman took a more sanguine view of the case method than had Gullahorn, and called for further research.

OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Finally, literature often yields insights into the obstacles and opportunities for implementing the case method of instruction. Castore and Berrien [1950] suggested that the instructor attend to the student discomfort that can result from a departure from the conventional teacher-dominated classroom routine. Lack of effective discussion skills on the part of either the students or the instructor can also hamper the implementation of the case method [Holt, 1928; Pigors & Pigors, 1954; Sattler, 1958]. The lack of good case material—or of any case material at all—emerges as the largest obstacle to effective implementation of the case method [Blouin, 1978; McWilliams, 1992]. Cases that are incomplete, contrived, or too complicated [Pigors & Pigors, 1954] or that imply so obvious a solution as to be trite [Sattler, 1958] easily undermine an otherwise promising method of instruction. Case materials can be secured from a variety of sources, including field experiences, guest lecturers, journals of professionals maintained for the purpose of gathering cases, and literature [Holt, 1928]. Regardless of the sources, cases should be collected systematically, preferably with the help of external funding, and sufficiently piloted and subsequently refined through classroom use [Schaffer, 1958].

CONCLUSION
To paraphrase a favorite aphorism among historians, the case method of instruction has a long past, but is short on a history. A historical perspective on the case method in the United States can yield insights into its limitations and possibilities as an instructional strategy and into the obstacles to and opportunities for its implementation. In the absence of an exhaustive history of the case method, this paper has attempted to explain the origins of the method in the United States and to focus on aspects of its past that have been overlooked during the recent renewal of interest. The instructor planning to employ the case method of instruction has little to lose and much to gain from a review of the travails of the predecessors who attempted to make their classroom practice consistent with the educational theories that guided them.

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