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## Chapter 2

### **Deriving Professional Knowledge from Cases**

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People learn most from the external world by interacting with it. What our senses take from our environment, our minds interpret, store, recall and, in turn, apply in our future contacts with people, objects, ideas, and events. When the processes of taking meaning from and attributing meaning to the world around us are brought to bear on life in schools, they can strengthen our capacity as teachers to perform to the fullest of our abilities.

We use this chapter to lay the groundwork for “interacting with” the cases in chapters 3-7; that is, to help teachers learn from the stories of more and less successful attempts to work in general education settings with children who have disabilities. The notion of how teachers use knowledge to advance their own professional expertise is central to this task.

#### Cases and teaching decisions

As a general rule, classroom teachers make roughly one teaching decision for every minute of instruction (Jackson, 1968; Hunt, 1971). The nature of classroom interactions in which teachers are constantly engaged commands rapid, contextually-relevant decision-making. Each decision requires the teacher to be keenly aware of the situation in which she finds herself, and to exercise the skills of analysis that successful teachers possess. The dynamic nature of “thinking like a teacher” means being aware of what is happening in classrooms, taking action based on knowledge, and maintaining perspective so as not be bound by one’s own perceptions. The challenge for teacher educators, then, is to assist developing teachers as they continue to hone their decision-making abilities.

Historically, teacher educators have taught decision-making strategies in two steps (Kennedy, 1990). The first step has involved the development of a codified, theory-laden knowledge base—book learning aimed at helping teachers merely acquire knowledge not apply it. The second step usually includes the development of decision-making skills for situation-based application of the knowledge acquired in step one. Even instruction in practical decision-making strategies, however, occurs frequently in formalized classes on campus. Such environments are often removed both literally and figuratively from real life in schools. Risko (1991) calls the skills taught in these settings “inert” knowledge; that is, knowledge disconnected from real-life thoughts and actions. If aspiring teachers truly acquire knowledge in either step one or two, they still struggle to recall and apply it in real classrooms.

“The challenge” according to Bruner (1996) “is always to *situate* our knowledge in the living context that poses the ‘presenting problem’.” In other words, educators must work to make knowledge they offer applicable to a kind of real life where people encounter and must deal with real problems. Scardamalia and Bereiter (1996) offer the concept of *Intentional Learning*--learning that results when one is actively engaged in trying “to achieve a cognitive objective”--as an alternative to the type of task-based outcomes found commonly in formalized settings. Their notion of helping people think for the purpose of achieving a particular result, and similar strategies that try connect learning to real-life contexts, may be especially well-suited to the preparation of teachers. We believe that the use of case-methods for preparing teachers can closely approximate the real-life environment of rigorous decision-making opportunities that classrooms afford.

A *case* is most often a narrative set in a real-world context and presented to prompt analysis and action based on tacit knowledge. Case-methodology has played a prominent role in other professional domains for years (Merseth, 1990). Business schools, law schools, and medical training programs have used cases for years as alternative approaches to direct instruction, seminars, and lectures. Only recently has case-methodology gained prominence in the field of teacher preparation (Merseth, 1996).

A case-study method in preservice teacher preparation can narrow the conceptual distance between “the way education life is supposed to be” and “the way it is” by challenging students to examine what they know about teaching and learning and to apply this knowledge to situations they may encounter in their future classrooms (Sudzina & Kilbane, 1992). According to Shulman (1992), cases “may be far more appropriate media for learning than the abstract and decontextualized lists of propositions or expositions of facts, concepts, and principles” most commonly associated with formalized instruction. Teaching cases provide a chance to make judgments and to suggest actions based on the best knowledge available. Merseth (1996) argues that using teaching cases as

opportunities for analysis and contemplation fosters *problem-solving and decision-making skills*. When teachers have opportunities to interact with and reflect on representations of real life as they exist in good cases, they imagine themselves actually being in such situations.

Reflection is a useful form of problem-solving that begins well before a problem is formally defined. Dewey (1933) suggested that possibilities for reflection began with some type of cognitive or attitudinal dissonance experienced when encountering a problem. This feeling of discord is brought forth by real-life situations where recognition of trouble in one's surroundings stimulates action toward bringing about "a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious" (pp. 100-101). When teachers reflect they think like professionals (Kleinfeld, 1992); they exercise their powers to reason (Sprinthall & Thies-Sprinthall, 1983).

### An Algorithm for Case Analysis

We have organized case-based instruction to encourage teachers to think like professionals, that is, to approach teaching as a composite activity involving competing issues, differing perspectives, and possible courses of action emanating from different sources of knowledge that can result in various consequences (McNergney, Herbert & Ford, 1993; 1994). We have translated this view into a five-step process for analyzing cases. The steps include: (1) perceiving issues, problems, dilemmas, and opportunities; (2) recognizing values and perspectives that drive actions; (3) applying appropriate knowledge; (4) suggesting possible teaching actions; and (5) speculating on the possible consequences of such actions (Herbert & McNergney, 1995; 1998).

As we explain below, these steps are meant to stimulate and sustain professional reflection on case events. The degree to which teachers learn from and later apply knowledge from cases to their real lives depends in no small measure on the verisimilitude of the story and its importance to teachers and on their attention to the five steps.

**Issues.** Cases are grounded in core issues and relevant facts. These issues are identifiable and provide the foundation for the interpretation of that particular situation. Issues can take the form of problems, dilemmas, or opportunities. Problems are issues that one can conceivably solve. Dilemmas are unique problems that have no apparent solution and, therefore, require some type of coping mechanism. Opportunities are simply possibilities for improving on situations that appear to be working satisfactorily in their present condition.

A prospective teacher in a case-based course said this about the value of identifying issues in a case:

*While students in other courses were making bulletin boards, we were dealing with real-life situations, ones that we will encounter in the field. This course helped me to realize the many problems that occur in schools and ways to handle those problems.*

**Perspectives.** What people see in a situation depends on where they stand. Stakeholders often perceive different issues and assign varying levels of importance to the issues. In real life, when they fail to decenter--to view a situation from more than one vista--the result can be difficult, contentious, even disastrous. Perspectives fully and fairly represented influence which issues dominate discussion and which ones are delayed for the time being or are passed over altogether.

A teacher's perspective on life in classrooms is heavily informed by the beliefs and images she holds about students, teaching, and the essential qualities of learning. Teachers make decisions based largely on the interactions of these beliefs and images. For this reason, an essential component of the case analysis process is an identification of multiple perspectives and values held by stakeholders in the case. In teaching cases, these stakeholders can be students, parents, principals, other teachers, indeed anyone involved in or touched by the story.

Cases provide chances for teachers to consider the many perspectives naturally associated with each situation. When a teacher views a case from a perspective other than her own, the issues identified earlier can vary in importance or disappear completely, only to be replaced by new ones. As instructors of case methods we do not expect this step to change people's own views but we think that considering different perspectives should at the very least raise doubts in some minds. A good discussion that airs different points of view often creates a healthy disequilibrium in a group's thinking about a case.

We perceive some social-psychological danger in this step; that is, a casual consideration of perspectives can easily result in a kind of cultural relativism--one person's perspective is as good as another's. When we teach using the five steps we take care to caution students that (1) we must consider multiple perspectives in a case but that (2) some people in the case may be more credible than others, their views more germane. Exactly which people are worth listening to, and in what ways their perspicacity may reveal itself, are open to question.

Figuratively stepping into another person's shoes allows us to be that person--to identify with his or her inner-most thoughts and emotions, to imagine being in her or his situation. When the story is rich and the discussion round and full, the perspectives represented in the case, indeed the case itself, can become models or metaphors for our own lives--"I might be this person. I might value what this person values. I might be in this situation. I might have to do something to make matters better." These activities seem important in the development of a teacher as a teacher. And most if not all are absent from the more formal, decontextualized approaches of preparing teachers. As one student in a case-based course commented, "To see how people reacted to the situations in the case gives us a running knowledge of how things could happen and what we could do to change them."

**Knowledge.** The possession and application of knowledge distinguish teachers as a community of professionals. What we know as a profession emanates from practice, research, and theory. No single source of knowledge is per force better than another. The knowledge most useful to professionals is that knowledge which is most defensible, and defensibility is most convincing when it is measured in terms of the results of knowledge applied--if it works, it is useful.

Curricular materials, previous experience, ideas of colleagues, theoretical treatises, and the like, all may be valuable resources for guiding one's actions as a teacher. The concept of "community" is important to the development of knowledge as well. In a professional community knowledge is shared. Knowledge applied to cases provides opportunities for professional peers to benefit from the knowledge held by one another. Bruner (1997) suggests that: "There are things known by each individual... more still is known by the group or is discoverable by discussion within the group; and much more still is stored somewhere else -- in the 'culture'..." (pg. 52). For these reasons, good, solid case work done by groups of professionals has much to recommend itself.

**Action and Consequences.** At some point in a situation, a teacher must take or defer action for the purpose of producing desirable results. Teaching actions are typically aimed at compensating for, remediating, or capitalizing on circumstances. The professional propensity for action makes steps four and five critical junctures in the process of case analysis, for they yield demonstrable indications of how and why teachers think as they do about their work. Teachers' actions and the consequences of these actions offer direction for improving that work.

Most teaching situations are complex. They do not lend themselves to the "one-right-answer" or the "one-best-action" approach to teaching. Instead, it is quite possible that many defensible courses of action exist for any given teaching situation. A knowledgeable teacher might decide to address issues embedded in a particular case in several different ways. This view frees a teacher to consider varying courses of action she *might* take instead of looking for the one "correct" answer that might exist in the mind of someone less knowledgeable.

If a teacher's actions work, they are "right" or "correct." Although there are many indicators of teaching success and failure, ultimately the proof of whether a teaching action "works" can be found in the actions and learning of the students. Good teaching yields actively engaged, productive students who are motivated and capable of continuing to learn in the absence of a teacher. As many experienced teachers are well aware, however, despite our best intentions, not all actions result in desirable consequences. We believe the more teachers have opportunities to predict and judge the consequences of their actions in cases, the more likely they will be to perform these professional behaviors successfully in real life.

### **Conclusion**

The five-step process of case analysis described above is not a recipe to be followed in linear fashion. Sometimes we encourage students to start at step one by identifying issues and work their way straight through to step five--speculating on likely consequences. But sometimes we suggest that teachers begin by imagining desirable consequences and work their way backward to identify the issues that can most readily be tied to those consequences. At other times we encourage students of teaching to jump into the middle of the analysis process by thinking about what they know, or what more they would want to know if they were in the situation, and work both ways.

In real life the journey from one end of the problem-solving process to the other is rarely a direct one. In our own teaching of cases we try to reflect the interactivity, the interdependence of the steps, but do so in a way that allows us to attend to all five. We may go deeper into the knowledge phase with one group at one time and concentrate more on consequences or perspectives with another group. But over the long term we try to communicate, both verbally and through our choice of activities, a sense of the importance of thinking carefully through all five steps.

In Chapter 8, Ellwein suggests that instructors can teach cases as *representations* of classroom life which portray wisdom and insight about teaching garnered from experience and previous understandings. Case

methodology offers one means through which students of teaching can learn to "play the game" of teaching within the relatively safe confines of a case discussion. And if they play well, they can craft images of the teaching profession that might usefully guide their behavior later in classrooms.

In the end, the images we hold about teaching greatly influence the evolution of our professional knowledge. As we interact with the cases that follow in later chapters, we find ourselves re-examining the judgments, biases, goals, and actions we consider good and appropriate for successful classroom life. Occasionally, what we "know" about teaching is challenged, and we must accommodate both our knowledge and our images accordingly. The cases suggest to us that there is more to professional knowledge than the formulation of principles and axioms which correspond to desired outcomes. The term "professional knowledge" connotes a community of individuals--in this case, teachers and other educators--engaged in action and inquiry specifically designed to help students learn. Teachers who bring "professional knowledge" to bear address real-life problems in a recursive manner, one that produces action congruent with the mores of the larger community of like-minded teachers and educators.

Deriving such professional knowledge is not a matter of gathering as many "tricks-of-the-trade" as possible. Instead, it can be described better as the practice of becoming increasingly cognizant of the factors that most concern the majority of stakeholders. Such awareness is constantly in development and is best achieved when one is immersed in situations that require recognition of these factors in the process of solving *real educational problems*. The residue of acting in such situations is not simply an additional tool or two to use in another similar situation. Learning from cases can be measured in terms of understanding of what it means to act professionally. Perhaps the ultimate goal of studying cases of teaching and learning is not always to know *more*, but rather to know *better*. We trust the following cases will prompt readers to reconsider their images of teaching, teachers, and students and to understand better the knowledge that emerges when they interact with the cases.