Using the Internet to Enhance the Study of Dilemma Cases in Professional Education

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Introduction

This presentation reports ongoing research on the use of Internet technologies and dilemma cases in a professional education program for school leaders. Dilemma cases are narratives of school problems for which there is not a single consensual solution. Reflection based on tightly focused, contextualized situations is a strategy for examining the nature of educational leadership. The primary focus is on administrator leadership. Societal diversity is broadly defined as the interplay of ideas, values, and perspectives that may be attributed to group membership. It may manifest itself in linguistic, cultural, ideological, or experiential differences among groups.

School problems linked to diversity call for continuous reflection about the dominant culture in which the schools are rooted. Further, because the challenges of diversity stem from real or imagined differences in group perspective, common solutions based on the rules of the dominant culture may be regarded as inappropriate by some groups. This calls for professional development strategies that are participatory and reflective. Instead of relying on managerial formulas or the customary "rules" of school administration, strategies must be designed through which students of administration gain insight into social and educational problems that are defined, at least in part, by the world view of which they themselves partake. That world view, which may be characterized as the "American national culture," is made up of assumptions, values, and traditions which define our hegemonic culture. To grasp the significance of diversity and their role in it, participants must examine issues critically and along two dimensions: as external problems that can be analyzed and resolved professionally, and as a generalized *problematique* created by the socio-cultural milieu of which they are a part.

Objectives

The considerations outlined above led me to design tools for studying diversity that practitioners would find realistic and practical. I wanted the involvement of students in the affective as well as cognitive domains. This goal was mediated by other factors which became corollary objectives:

1) Focus on adult learning. Use principles from the field of andragogy (adult pedagogy) to recognize that as learners, adults differ from children. Until recently, children have been the primary concern of research on teaching and learning.

2) Constructivism preferred over transmission theory. Use constructivist teaching strategies to help students construct their own knowledge and understandings.

3) Peer authorship of learning tools. I wanted to collect and use the work of successive cohorts of students to build a collection of authentic problems for subsequent groups to examine and compare with their own.

4) Transposing theory and example. In traditional teaching, theory is presented first and examples are then used to illustrate theory. In this instance I wanted students to create their own theories about the dynamics of diversity based on the case materials written by them and their classmates.

5) Viewing diversity as non-pathological. In causal discourse "diversity" sometimes becomes a euphemism for social and family problems, low motivation to learn, or the problems of social integration experienced by immigrant students. I wanted to address the issues of diversity more neutrally allowing students to determine the locus and causes of negative patterns where they exist.

Andragogy and Constructivism

Andragogy and constructivism are related concepts derived from the study of learning, instruction, and cognition. As proposed by Knowles [1983] ***andragogy*** is the knowledge base of assumptions and generalization that can be made about the teaching of adults. This concept is closely related to ***pedagogy*** and has been used largely in studies of teaching and learning in children.[1] Adult educators emphasize the need to accentuate differences between children and adults as learners. They posit that adult learners have distinct characteristics which influence their behavior as students, chiefly that:

- Adulthood brings with it more responsibility and an attendant self-directedness in education. To become older means we should become "wiser" hence, more judicious about the time, energy, and resources we invest in formal learning.

- Adult levels of culminated experience are resources with which to mediate new learning. Adults expect new knowledge and information to "make sense" in relation to what we already know and find useful. New information is considered in the context of prior knowledge and must be congruent with prior experience before it can be internalized.

- Adults are often pragmatic learners; we seek to fit new skills and knowledge into perceived lacunae in our personal or professional lives. Adults also want assurance the new learning will be in some way useful.

- Professionals have a strong desire to act competently and to avoid mistakes. They want new knowledge to increase their ability to be effective and efficient. because we want to be more competent and confident, the learning we undergo as adults must be practical, realistic, and targeted.

The principles of constructivist education are closely related to those of andragogy. Constructivists assert that knowledge and insight are embraced or "owned" in direct relation to the degree that learners participate in constructing their own knowledge or insight. Constructivists reject the "banking theory of education," the view that knowledge is collected by an elite class of scholars and specialists who dispense it to others.[2] In constructivism, the role of teachers and professors is less oriented toward transferring information and knowledge. Rather, they regard themselves as collaborative coaches who bring students in contact with materials for constructing learning. They help students organize their learning resources, encourage reflection, and help them distinguish between important questions and less transcendent issues. A corollary to this change in role is a different view of the "correct answer." For constructivists the correct answer may have greater flexibility and adaptability than is the case in tractional conceptions of teaching and learning.

Traditionalists view learning as an individualistic endeavor; constructivists regard it as a social and interactive activity, as phenomena that occur in a social context. In this approach "instruction" may be better defined as the creation of *learning environments* or social laboratories for learning [Wilson, 1996]. Finally, constructivists stress

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[1] This distinction is tentative and is not used uniformly in the literature. Pedagogy is widely used without regard to the age difference of students. Many scholars and researchers in this field have not adopted the term andragogy in their own writings.

[2] The conception of traditional education as banking is often attributed to Paolo Freire, a Brazilian who is also credited with leading the discourse on *critical pedagogy*. See [Freire, 1979].

that learning is not unidirectional. In an ideal learning community teachers too have opportunities to learn and gain deeper insights into the subject of study.

The need to apply new ways of teaching adults becomes powerfully clear when the characteristics of adult learners are considered in tandem with the principles of constructivist, critical teaching. The aggregate concept is especially useful in the context of the multiple perspectives and values associated with diverse group membership.

Nature of Dilemma Cases

To make learning participatory, constructivist, and collaborative, and to give students a role in defining learning objectives, I created a process based on *dilemma cases*. Small work groups are formed to write and present cases based on personal experience, newspaper accounts, or their own imagination. The cases are presented to the class in draft form for technical review. After refinement, they are again presented to the class for in-depth analysis and reflection about the implications for leadership which they suggest.

Dilemma cases consist of short narrative stories at the core of which there is a professional quandary for school leaders or policy makers. Cases include an introduction that explains the social, cultural and political context. This is followed by a description of a specific problem or dilemma in which school personnel are required to make a difficult decision or take an action which may be resisted by one or more groups in the school community. The actions of the protagonist -- a school principal, superintendent, school board, or other leaders -- will impact on students, teachers, parents, or some segment of the community at large no matter which option is selected. The options for resolving the case are such that no single option will satisfy all parties. They are made complex by creating opposition factions who hold divergent moral, ethical, or religious positions. To assist in making a selection or otherwise changing the situation to a more favorable one, the text provides information about the key players in the case and the values, convictions, or beliefs which shape their positions on issues.

These are more than mere differences of opinion and the situations described are not amenable to a rational, positivist solution, to managerial acumen, or decisive unilateral action. While the responsible party is generally a school official or policy agent, the issues presented often go beyond the school and outside the normal range of situations for which the generic tools of management and administration will suffice. Dilemma cases often accentuate the differences between formal administrative practices and the equally powerful means used by communities of interest in resolving problems. They may include situations that require extramural solutions or which highlight sensitivities born of religious differences, historical animosities, or differences in values. In many cases a common theme is the complexity of the human experience cast against the narrow rules of quasi-governmental bodies such as school boards.[3]

Using Dilemma Cases

Dilemma cases have proven to be useful tools in the education of education leaders who equate the high level of professionalism of their craft with a command-and-control interpretation of leadership. Dilemmas are a powerful reminder that education occurs in a complex matrix of social, religious, and familial activity. In these broader settings the cultural and affective side of being human may be very different from the socio-cultural orientation of the schools since the latter are commonly bound up in the dominant culture. Students soon realize that, as diversity increases many school problems cannot be fully resolved inside the walls of the schools or without considering effects of diversity in shaping the perspectives of stakeholders. They also realize that there is not a single correct solution to many problems.

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[3] To review a sampling of dilemma cases described here use a gopher client or World Wide Web browser. The uniform resource locator or URL is <gopher://pluribus.tc.columbia.edu>.

This insight is critically important for those who believe that the practice of administration embodies a set of rules for making correct choices and decisions or that the exercise of leadership is knowing what to do in all situations however complex. Through the study of dilemmas leaders confront the need to make *judgements* in tandem with managerial decisions. They learn that a reflective, culturally sensitive approach to judgement making is a valuable tool of effective school administration.

Students were given only these broad guidelines for preparing cases:

> 1) Whenever possible, use facts and personal experiences as the basis of the case and build on those. Factual adherence to historical events may not strengthen a case presentation and is often necessary to embellish a case to achieve the level of complexity that will make it useful as a learning tool. Often, it is advisable to forego fidelity to a real life event or situation in the interest of creating a situation the *could have happened.*
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> 2) Do not be concerned with how the situation was resolved in real life. This information is generally not germane. If there is, or was, an obvious "correct solution' the case will not generate rich discussion or reflection. Further, there is no guarantee that the real-life solution was the best one; that *there is* one best solution; or that the same solution will be appropriate at a different time or place.
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> 3) If the solution for one case can be found in published administrative procedures, institutional regulations, or in a collective bargaining contract the dilemma ia not as forceful. The case may be an interesting ***administrative problem*** but there is no genuine dilemma when a prescribed remedy exists. In many dilemmas there are negative consequences for the protagonists no matter what solution they choose. conversely, the rewards for making a good choice are more likely to be intrinsic.
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> 4) In terms of information content, cases must stand alone. There will not be any further information provided beyond that presented in the written cases.

Dilemma cases may vary in focus from one semester to another. For example, one class chose to address issues of access and equity while another focused on the integration of immigrant students. As might be expected, the quality of case writing varies widely. While the literary quality varies, the total effect of reading and discussing a number of cases is powerful. Student reaction, elicited through anonymous written evaluations, has been overwhelmingly positive about the degree to which cases help them focus on the non-prescriptive aspects of administration and the leadership skills needed to work effectively in complex settings. To improve the structure and format of their cases, students are offered the opportunity to present them to classmates in draft form and to seek suggestions in class and via e-mail on ways to improve them in both form and substance. When the author teams are satisfied with the quality of their work, the cases are turned in on diskette for posting to the Internet as well as on paper for comments by the professor.

Author teams are asked to refrain from suggesting a solution to their classmates only to identify all feasible options. They are also responsible for collecting and summarizing the substantive interactions generated by their case. The material is presented as part of the semester's work along with their observations about the degree to which their case accomplished the desired objective of creative, participatory learning with applicability to the world of administration. Online discussions are captured on diskettes and submitted in that medium.

Pluribus Unum Internet Gopher

Internet "gophers" or "gopher sites" were one of the earliest and most successful components of the Internet. Gophers facilitate the posting of text documents which can be accessed via a user-friendly text menu. While not as sophisticated as World Wide Web sites, gophers have two important advantages. They are inexpensive and easy

to create and maintain. The **Pluribus Unum Gopher**, the gopher site used in this work, was installed on a personal computer. The gopher software is a non-commercial package developed at the University of Michigan and made available free of charge to educational institutions [González, 1996].

The gopher site is used as the repository and source of dilemma cases along with other resources dealing with diversity and leadership. Students are encouraged to retrieve practice cases from the gopher. Cases created by previous classes also serve as models and discussion starters for class discussion. By contributing to the body of literature in the field, students have a sense of participating actively in the construction of the knowledge base of this field.

Conclusion

Four requirements have been identified to effecting deep educational change to the point that the change become fully accepted as mainstream practice. The requirements are:

- *proof of concept,* to show that a significant alternative to existing practice is possible;
- *a driving force*, to provide the historical energy to carry innovations through to full implementation;
- *a moving social vision*, to legitimate the costs incurred with change and to inspire the efforts needed to effect it;
- *a tangible institutional leverage*, to enable new practices to provide a framework for the mobilization of disparate elements, transforming them from within [Reibel, 1994].

After four semesters, the work reported here has demonstrated the viability of using dilemma narratives in conjunction with e-mail and an Internet gopher as instructional tools in graduate and professional education. This constructivist learning environment meets the first of the requirements noted above, proof-of-concept. Further work and more extended research is needed to assess the degree to which the other requirements can also be met.

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