

Pressing the Question

Problem-based Learning Using Congregational Leadership Narratives

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Many questions and problems arise throughout life and the educational process that do not have traditional or definite answers. One method for effectively engaging these problems in the classroom is through narratives or case studies. Case studies are valuable teaching tools, and they provide both teachers and students with new ways to explore controversial issues and topics together. This paper explores the methods for developing and implementing effective case studies into a congregational leadership course.

Jacques Hamel defines a case study as an “in-depth study of the cases under consideration” that strives “to highlight the features or attributes of social life.”¹ Simply put, cases are stories—usually real stories or stories based on actual events—that allow students to describe, understand and explain the events or issues more effectively than many other teaching methods.² They are presented as open-ended problems with no definite answers.³

A good case study is an engaging, conflict provoking, decision-forcing story.⁴ It focuses on a contemporary issue that is both interesting and relevant to the students and aligns with the instructor’s course objectives.⁵ A case is comprised of four main parts: a

¹ Jacques Hamel, *Case Study Methods*, Qualitative Research Methods Series, Vol. 32, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993) p. 1-2.

² “What is a Case?” Teaching and Learning with Technology, Pennsylvania State University, 9 July 2004 <<http://ilt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/cases/casewhat.html>> and Hamel, p. 39.

³ “What is a Case?” and James P. Honan and Cheryl Sternman Rule, *Using Cases in Higher Education* (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2002) p. 2.

⁴ Clyde Freeman Herreid, “What Makes a Good Case?” National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science, Jan 1998 <<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/good-case.html>> 23 Aug 2005.

⁵ Herreid, “What Makes a Good Case?” and Honan, p 15.

real world scenario, an open-ended problem, the required output and the supporting documents.⁶

The first major task in writing a case is to select and define the issue to be studied. It must be in complete harmony with the course objectives and present a lingering puzzle that will sustain discussion.⁷ Once the issues are selected, a scenario with an open-ended problem can be developed. This can be tricky, as it is tempting to cover many issues in a particular narrative. However, it is essential to focus on one or two issues to create a compelling story.⁸ Students must also be drawn into the narrative and empathize with the central characters so they will believe the problem is worth solving.⁹ The case ought to include an element of uncertainty, a richness of character and the potential for multiple outcomes or ‘answers.’¹⁰ Ambiguity is essential, and the case should end with more questions than answers.¹¹

To develop an appropriate scenario, one must first research the topic/issue and brainstorm a list of all the possible characters and the possible principles that could be taught.¹² From these lists, write a draft from the vantage point of one of the central characters.¹³ Once a working draft has been generated, list the issues that are likely to arise and create a series of discussion questions.¹⁴ Bear the audience in mind during the writing process and make a conscious effort to include as much human interest as

⁶ “Writing the Case,” Teaching and Learning with Technology, Pennsylvania State University, 22 Dec 2004 <<http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/cases/casewhat.html>> 23 Aug 2005.

⁷ Honan, p. 15.

⁸ Honan, p. 15.

⁹ Herreid, “What Makes a Good Case?”

¹⁰ Herreid, “What Makes a Good Case?”

¹¹ Honan, p. 13-14.

¹² Clyde Freeman Herreid, “Cooking with Betty Crocker: A Recipe for Case Writing,” National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science, Jan 2000 <<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/betty.html>> 23 Aug 2005.

¹³ Herreid, “Cooking with Betty Crocker.”

¹⁴ Herreid, “Cooking with Betty Crocker.”

possible in the case.¹⁵ Turn information into dialogue where appropriate and use a conversational writing style.¹⁶

Next, take care to craft an assignment that matches the objectives of the course.¹⁷ This might be a mock proposal, multimedia presentation, opinion paper, a recommendation or statement of the problems raised by the case, a mock debate, class discussion, or short answer questions.¹⁸ Whatever the assignment, the students must be aware of what is expected of them before they begin, and make sure the assignment is “doable” within the given timeframe for the case study.¹⁹

When compiling the supporting documents, keep it short, but include all necessary information. Too much material can overwhelm students, and indexes or detailed outlines are good ways to include additional information.²⁰ These documents can/should include: official documents, news reports, personal accounts/remarks, timelines and a list of additional resources.²¹

After all four parts have been completed, assemble them as a written dossier or packet to distribute to the students.²² There are many ways to implement an effective case study (case study methods). One is the ‘role play,’ in which students are assigned different parts to research and then perform.²³ The ‘lecture format’ or ‘background’ case

¹⁵ Clyde Freeman Herreid, “The Way of Flesch: The Art of Writing Readable Cases,” National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science, Feb 2002 <<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/flesch.html>> 23 Aug 2005. This means using personal names or gender specific titles like ‘aunt’ or ‘guy’ instead of impersonal titles like ‘they,’ ‘it’ or ‘student.’

¹⁶ Herreid, “The Way of Flesch.”

¹⁷ “Writing the Case.”

¹⁸ “Writing the Case.”

¹⁹ “Writing the Case.”

²⁰ “Writing the Case.”

²¹ Hamel, p. 45& Honan, p 15.

²² “Writing the Case.” Another option is to post all of the information online. See <http://tlt.its.psu.edu/tools/tools_index.html> for more information.

²³ “What is a Case?”

study allows students to place the “content ‘in context.’”²⁴ The ‘diagnose the problem’ or ‘complex’ case study forces students to identify the underlying problem based on the information they are provided.²⁵ During a ‘jigsaw’ case study, different students or groups are assigned subsections of a larger case and then present their results to their classmates.²⁶

A case study is doomed if it fails to sustain the interest and involvement of the participants.²⁷ This could occur when an instructor fails to prepare properly or does not allot enough time for the students to complete the assignment, but case study failure is usually due to vague, unclear or confusing language.²⁸ If the goal of the case study is unclear, the problem is ill-defined or the narrative is one-sided or skewed, students will lose interest.²⁹

A good case study is structured in such a way that there is maximum involvement of all participants and minimal reliance on the instructor.³⁰ The instructor should function as a facilitator.³¹ Most of the instructor’s work is done in the preparation before the case study begins. They should distribute the materials to their students a few days early so that they can become familiar with the material and the process, and they must

²⁴ “What is a Case?” and Clyde Freeman Herreid, “Sorting Potatoes for Miss Bonner: Bringing Order to Case Study Methodology Through a Classification Scheme,” National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science, Feb 1998 <<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/bonner.html>> 23 Aug 2005.

²⁵ “What is a Case?”

²⁶ “What is a Case?”

²⁷ Honan, p. 15 & Clyde Freeman Herreid, “Return to Mars: How Not to Teach a Case Study,” National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science, Feb 1998 <<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/mars.html>> 23 Aug 2005.

²⁸ Honan, p. 15 and Herreid, “Return to Mars.”

²⁹ Honan, p. 15 and Herreid, “Return to Mars.”

³⁰ Honan, p. 1-2.

³¹ Honan, p. 9.

prepare several study questions for assignments and classroom discussion.³² The instructor should utilize the classroom setup (desks, tables, chalkboards, overhead projectors) and rearrange it if necessary.³³

Solid evaluation and grading of students during a case study may seem elusive, but it can be done in several ways. The most obvious is to evaluate class discussion. This is best accomplished by sitting down immediately after class with a seating chart or class roster and assigning each student a 1 to 4 and then tallying those numbers at the end of the case study/term.³⁴ The easiest method is to assign a paper or administer a “case-based” exam.³⁵ If the case study was a group project, peer evaluations are also beneficial.³⁶

Based upon this research and analysis of case studies, the author constructed a case study for a leadership class within the Christian Ministries department at Azusa Pacific University. The scenario surrounding the case was intended to reflect a situation the students in the class might one day encounter.

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The Scenario:

The Los Angeles Assembly of God (LAAG) is looking for a new pastor to lead their college group. Using the descriptions given below, gain a brief understanding and describe the leadership styles of the senior pastor and the four candidates. Then evaluate

³² Honan, p. 8. and Clyde Freeman Herreid, “And All That Jazz: An Essay Extolling the Virtues of Writing Case Teaching Notes,” National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science, Feb 2000 <<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/jazz.html>> 23 Aug 2005.

³³ Honan, p. 27-29.

³⁴ Clyde Freeman Herreid, “When Justice Peeks: Evaluating Students in Case Method Teaching,” National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science, <<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/justice.html>> 23 Aug 2005.

³⁵ Herreid, “When Justice Peeks.”

³⁶ Herreid, “When Justice Peeks.” See <<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/justice.html>> for a sample peer evaluation form.

the candidates and present your hiring recommendation to the church board. Your recommendation should be based upon your knowledge of the differing leadership styles and how they relate. You must consider the compatibility of each candidate's leadership style with the senior pastor's leadership style, and how the candidate's leadership style would fit in and benefit the church and the college group.

- Research Q: What questions would you need to ask if you were applying for this position at LAAG?

The Church:

The Los Angeles Assembly of God (LAAG) church is located in Orange County, California. It is a medium-sized church that averages 800 people per week at its Sunday services. The congregation is composed of both English and Spanish speaking people, but all church services are conducted in English. Most of the church members belong to the middle class, but there are also several struggling families and some families who are fairly well off.

The congregation is able to support a reasonably sized staff. Thus far, the church board has created 6 positions: a senior pastor, an executive pastor, a worship pastor, a youth pastor, a families pastor and a Christian education pastor. The church relies heavily upon the participation of the congregation and volunteers, and they are looking forward to the introduction of a college pastor.

LAAG is fairly well known in the community. It has initiated a few successful neighborhood service programs and a few of the city council members are active within the congregation. Most of LAAG's resources are spent within the church, and the congregation has not changed significantly over the past several years.

The Sunday services follow a mixture of traditional and contemporary styles, but there is an emphasis upon creating a relaxed, family atmosphere. The worship music consists of hymns (typically sung in a contemporary style) and contemporary Christian songs. The worship pastor enjoys incorporating everyone into the service, so the adult choir and the children's choir perform frequently on Sunday mornings. LAAG is currently considering some changes in the worship services that would reflect the diversity within the congregation, such as Spanish-speaking elements and sign language interpreters.

The Pastor:

Contingency theory

The senior pastor, Chuck, has been at LAAG his entire adult life. He began as a volunteer in the youth group while he was in college and became senior pastor several years later after he had completed seminary. The church board initially appointed Chuck because he demonstrated the qualities that the board believed necessary to deal with the challenges the church was facing at that time. Pastor Chuck fit the situation well and successfully navigated the church through some difficult changes in Sunday school curriculum and worship music styles. The board and the congregation were pleased to have "the right man for the job." Pastor Chuck has responded positively to the board's appraisal, and he internalized these values. He has resolved to find "the right man" for every position within the church.

Pastor Chuck is very outgoing and is a well-known figure in the immediate community. He enjoys a grandfather persona with most of the congregation and loves to

stay abreast of the church members' lives. He appears to be acquainted with everyone, but few people know him well.

Pastor Chuck is very detail-oriented, and Chuck's definition of "the right man" is usually someone who will use his ideas and follow his instructions. Pastor Chuck is personally involved on some level in nearly every program at the church, and he likes to maintain a certain level of supervision over the rest of the staff. This isn't because he doesn't trust his staff or have confidence in their abilities; he simply wants to ensure that the church is operating in a manner that best serves his congregation.

He is hoping that the board will support him and collaborate to select a college pastor who will be able to balance his weaknesses without causing conflict or disrupting his routines.

The College Group:

The college group consists primarily of students and college-aged adults who have attended the church since their youth. The older members of the church frequently reminisce about when these kids were younger and staged tea parties and three-legged races at the church picnics. Predictably, the students who are lifelong church members form the core of the college group and can be somewhat exclusive. The rest of the group is comprised of people who were drawn to the youth group as teenagers, usually as a guest of one of the core students, and a few students from local colleges and universities.

At present, the college group is largely an extension of the youth group. It is loosely overseen by the youth pastor and aided by a few volunteers from the core group. The weekly meetings average about 50 people and the program consists of 10-15 minutes of worship songs, a speaker or discussion of some kind, usually followed by a time for

male and female “breakout groups,” which allows the students to express their thoughts and ideas in a smaller setting.

In addition to the weekly meetings, the group plans 1 or 2 bigger activities (ski-trips, overnight retreats, etc.) every semester and takes a mission trip to Mexico every summer. There are also many impromptu gatherings among the students; they often get together for pizza, movies or game nights. The group is also involved in community service. They periodically volunteer at a soup kitchen, help out with the church’s annual children’s Easter egg hunt and many of them are leaders in LAAG’s junior high and high school youth groups.

The current program has maintained a good sense of community among the students, and they enjoy meeting together every week. However, attendance has started to wane as the students have become too busy to properly plan and execute the weekly meetings and events. The group needs someone who can administer this program and provide a more welcoming environment for newcomers. Once a college pastor is hired, the new person must take care to introduce new ideas without isolating the existing programs that the students have grown up with and are accustomed to. The students want someone who has new ideas and at the same time accepts and can run existing programs.

The Board:

Team Leadership theory

The board of elders at LAAG will make the final hiring decision for the new college pastor. There are 8 board members, 5 men and 3 women. All of the board members are entrepreneurs and successful business people.

- Stan directs marketing for a large software company and sends his 3 children to a private school in the neighboring city.
- Walter opened a bakery and deli counter several years ago and is famous throughout the area for his cinnamon rolls, which he credits as the reason his business has survived the economic hardships over the years.
- Cindy took over her family's small publishing company after she completed graduate school and has been repeatedly praised for her shrewd business sense, which allowed her to expand her business and become Southern California's leading publisher.
- Noah is now retired, but he was a moderately successful insurance salesman for many years.
- Dana inherited her mother's beauty shop and ran it for many years. Her granddaughter now operates the shop.
- Holly opened a small scrapbooking store and now has one of the largest booths at scrapbooking expos across the state.
- Peter has attended LAAG his entire life and manages a local used bookstore.
- George is a former financial consultant who retired young then entered seminary and is currently orchestrating a business ethics programs at a local university.

All of the board members are committed to hiring a college pastor who will successfully administer the church's college group and fit the church's needs. They all have different opinions, but they are willing to compromise for the benefit of the church.

Though traditionally a children and family oriented church, the board has recognized the growing need for a pastor to facilitate a college-aged ministry.

The board feels strongly that they must support this age group, because this generation will soon lead the church. They feel that they must find a suitable leader for the college group before the burden becomes too much for the volunteers to bear. The board would like to see the new college pastor support and develop the college group while preparing them for future church involvement. Currently, the board is considering 4 promising candidates.

The Candidates:

Candidate #1: Kate Grantham, age 22 – Trait Approach

Kate has grown up in the church. She is familiar with the church structure and governance. She was very active in the youth group and her involvement has carried over into the college group. For the past few years, Kate has served as one of the key volunteers for the group and has been deemed the church's "point person" with regard to the college ministry.

Kate is very responsible and can be consistently relied upon; her focus is always upon finishing her current project. Throughout her life, Kate has demonstrated her intelligence, wisdom, initiative and persistence in everything she does. Kate is driven and confident in her self and her abilities. She plans to obtain her M.B.A. and eventually pursue a high-level career in a Fortune 500 company.

Her experiences as both a student and a leader in the college group give Kate unique insight into the college pastor position. Kate is about to graduate from a local university and would love to begin her career at her home church.

Candidate #2: Zach Johnson, age 30 – *Leader-Member Exchange Theory*

Zach began attending LAAG as a high school student. After he graduated from high school, Zach took a break for a few years while he worked as a salesclerk for a department store. During this time, Zach was drawn to the close-knit nature of the LAAG college group and soon took on some added responsibilities. Zach proved to be somewhat flaky as a volunteer and the older members of the church sighed at his apparent lack of direction in life. His intentions were genuine, but his responsibilities were eventually passed on to someone else. Zach didn't seem to mind this, and his participation became sporadic until he moved away to attend college.

Zach studied theology in college and now speaks of the life changing effect this had upon his life. He attended seminary and recently received his Master of Divinity (M.Div.). Zach loves to meet new people and build friendships. He believes that relationships build respect and trust, both in the home and in the church. Because of this, Zach initiates conversations with people—knowing that the more he initiates with them, the more they will grow to respect and trust him. His goal is to eventually arrive at a reciprocal relationship with all of his coworkers. People who receive more attention and feel included, Zach says, are more productive. Zach believes his education and his previous experiences of what *not* to do at the church make him an excellent candidate for the college pastor position.

Candidate #3: Libby Thomas, age 28 – *Path-Goal Theory*

Libby was raised on the east coast and moved to California to attend college. She received a bachelor's degree in Christian ministries from a Christian university and has

remained in the area. After she graduated from college, Libby was hired to take over the college/young adults program at a very large church.

With the resources and volunteer staff already in place at the church, Libby was able to acclimate herself to the situation quickly and resolved to maintain the same level of success within the program. Libby had inherited an already functioning program and, as her senior pastor said, was able to “keep the machine well-oiled.”

Libby relied upon her staff and volunteers to help execute the events and build relationships with the college students. Her staff was enthused by her dedication and commitment as she shared her vision for her time at the church, and they were motivated by the example Libby set for them. They appreciated Libby’s straightforwardness and they were never in doubt over any of her instructions; they knew what Libby expected of them and they knew how to accomplish it. Subsequently, Libby made an effort to show her appreciation for her staff’s hard work. She regularly treated them to lunch or dinner and gave small personal gifts whenever she felt a particular surge of satisfaction.

After 6 six years at a large church, Libby is now ready to work in a smaller church environment and views the college pastor position at LAAG as a fresh challenge. As an outsider to the LAAG community, Libby knows that she will need to diligently research the church and the way it is operated and governed.

Candidate #4: Josh Hernandez, age 24 – Transformational Leadership

Josh is acquainted with LAAG—he went to high school with several kids who were active in the LAAG youth group and he attended a few LAAG events over the years. Josh has been working as a youth pastor for several years. He has done a good job

with his youth group and his church is pleased with him, but he seems to lack the personality needed to create a dynamic, growing youth group.

As Josh analyzed himself and his youth group, he realized that he was much more effective in his relationships with older high school students. He has excellent administrative abilities and loves to be around people, but, as a Midwestern, small town boy, Josh is somewhat befuddled by the junior high kids running rampant in Southern California. Their aimlessness frustrates Josh and he feels ineffective as he tries to help them reach their potential. The older students are more grounded and receptive to Josh's nudges to be creative and maximize their achievements in life. They view Josh as a role model and come to him with their problems. Josh provides them with guidance and gently rebukes them when necessary while working with them to achieve their goals.

Given his success with older students, Josh believes that his strengths are better suited for college ministry. He believes that the college pastor position at LAAG would allow him to fully exercise his strengths.

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This case study was implemented with a group of second and third year Christian ministries students. Most of the students intend to enter some form of church-related ministry upon their graduation, and they found the church leadership situation in the case study to be realistic and relatable. In preparation for the case study, the students were asked to familiarize themselves with the leadership theories used in the case study and to come to class prepared to make a recommendation to the LAAG church board. The students were broken into smaller groups of approximately four or five people and asked

to share their individual recommendations and then present a group recommendation to the class.

The key to the case study was a solid understanding of the contingency theory, the leadership style embodied by the LAAG senior pastor. Based upon this understanding of the contingency theory, the other candidates and their leadership styles could then be analyzed as they relate to it. The students did not properly understand the contingency theory, and this weakened the effectiveness of the case study.

Within their small groups, the students appeared somewhat distracted by the colorful personality details of each candidate and devoted less attention to the leadership theories implicit in the descriptions. The students were able to recognize the weaknesses and the potential in each candidate, but they were unable to give a concrete answer in terms of the leadership theories.

The biggest obstacle in implementing this case study was the lack of preparation on the part of the students. They were not adequately familiarized with the leadership theories, and this prevented them from truly reaching the heart of the case study. The professor was angry at their lack of preparation and expressed his frustration to the class. He had expected them to be better prepared and more detail-oriented in their analysis of the case study and the leadership theories. The result was that the professor was forced to explain the leadership theories as a large class. The class referred to a diagram of the various theories in their leadership textbook and then analyzed the senior pastor and the four candidates to arrive at a recommendation.

Ultimately, the class decided that Josh Hernandez, the transformational leadership candidate, was the best choice for the LAAG church board. This conclusion was only

arrived at after the class' analysis of the contingency theory and its relationship to transformational leadership.

A major strength of the case study was its realistic nature. Several of the students commented that their home churches were going through similar transitions and challenges as the LAAG. As many of the students plan to work at a church at some time in the future, they identified with the characters and easily envisioned themselves in their places. They enjoyed learning about leadership styles through a real life scenario, as opposed to traditional learning methods, and began to understand the significance of the course material to their lives and their future careers.

To improve the effectiveness and learning outcomes of the case study, the author should have included more specific instructions in the scenario portion. The students were unclear as to the exact nature of their task, and detailed instructions for analyzing the leadership styles of each character and how to relate them would have benefited the outcome. A diagram or chart that could aid this process would have also been valuable. The professor also should have devoted more class time to description and analysis of the leadership styles before introducing the case study. If the students had approached the case study with a thorough knowledge of the leadership styles, the frustration experienced by both the students and the instructor would have been minimized.

In conclusion, case studies are most effective when they are well prepared and carefully structured. It must be an appealing, realistic situation for the students, and it must be tailored to their level of knowledge of the subject matter. Case studies are an innovative teaching/learning method, and they bring fresh perspectives to complex questions and problems.

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