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ABSTRACT

An undergraduate small group communication course in "Great Group Breakdowns" is discussed, in which students wrote case studies describing dysfunction in historical and fictional groups, in groups in which they had personally participated, and in groups found in film and literature. This paper argues that this is a uniquely useful method that provides benefits beyond those found in a more traditional use of the case study. Contains 29 references and 17 notes. (Author/RS)

Students Writing Case Studies of Group Dysfunction

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Students Writing Case Studies of Group Dysfunction

Miscommunication killed the crew of the *Challenger*. By commission and by omission, communication was at the heart of a decision to launch when temperatures made vital O-rings fail to perform. After an intensive case study, Hirokawa, Gouran, and Martz (1988) identified “six major factors that exerted an influence on the decision-making process and ultimately led to the launch of the *Challenger*. These factors include (1) faulty shared beliefs . . . , (2) questionable reasoning . . . , (3) perceived pressure . . . , (4) shift of presumption in favor of the launch, (5) ineffective persuasion attempts . . . , and (6) use of ambiguous language” (p. 411). Only through communication could the faulty shared beliefs have been identified and corrected. But, through communication, faulty shared beliefs developed. Only through communication could the questionable reasoning have been questioned. But, through communication, questionable reasoning occurred. Only through communication could inappropriate psychological pressures have been identified and discussed and put into proper perspective. But, through communication, pressure was perceived that shifted presumption against behaviors that constituted appropriate safety measures. Once this happened, ambiguous language and ineffective attempts to persuade those who could make necessary changes in policy allowed the perpetuation of the bad choices already made. Communication processes that might have prevented the tragedy did not. Worse, communication played a vital role in allowing the scene to unfold as it did. Faulty communication can be identified as a principal component in the catastrophic outcomes.

Some amount of misunderstanding or process breakdown is typical of communication in general and is particularly prevalent in small groups. Small groups often employ communication processes that fail to produce high quality decisions (see, for example, Steiner, 1972; Hirokawa

& Pace, 1983). Small groups also are subject to dynamics that can alter communication until actual degradation of thought occurs. Indeed, sometimes giving a problem to a small group to solve can produce a worsening of the problem. This paper describes a method by which such group dysfunction can be studied and taught: the use of case studies written by students in the small group communication course. This focus prepares students to recognize, understand, and perhaps prevent dysfunction in their own groups.

Using case studies in the classroom is not a new idea.¹ Making the writing of case studies into the primary process of the small group discussion course probably is a new idea. Regardless, the thesis of this paper is that writing case studies describing group dysfunctions is a useful method for the study of small group communication. The paper begins with a discussion regarding the pedagogical merits of having students write case studies and a description of the processes used in a class that was designed around that idea. The remainder of the paper provides the results of that experience. Those results include the effects experienced by students who had to write case studies and advice generated by them for other students who are given the assignment to write case studies.

The Justification for Having Students Write Case Studies

This argument has three parts. First, case studies are a worthwhile pedagogical tool. Second, students are able to write their own case studies. Third, *writing* case studies can be anticipated to provide the student with benefits in addition to those provided by a more traditional use of the case study, in which an instructor presents a case for students to analyze or solve.

One reason why case studies are pedagogically rich is that they are able to provide the pertinent details of a key incident or combination of incidents in the life of a group. Well-written cases should include details that play a central role in explanations for why the group took the direction it did or for why the group manifested the dynamics it did, especially ones that became increasingly problematic for the group. Cases concern what might be called breakpoints² in a group's problem-solving processes or critical incidents³ in the life of the group or during the development of a group's culture.

Useful case studies include enough details about the history of interactions within the group that the reader himself or herself has the opportunity to try to figure out what did or what might go wrong in the group. The case provides a form of vicarious experience that can be found on a continuum of learning techniques (Burtis & Pond-Burtis, 2001) somewhere between an example used rhetorically in a lecture and a simulation or role-play in which the student acts out the processes being studied. More engaging than the rhetorical question and less threatening than the role-play, the case study allows the student to apply and test theoretical knowledge against practical, realistic circumstances. Such "vicarious experience" is valuable without sharing the risk that would come from having a similar experience in the workplace—thus preserving the academy's claim of providing learning without the hard knocks typically associated with failures in "the real world." Theoretical justification for the importance of engaging student experience in this manner is provided in Burtis and Pond-Burtis (2001).

Classes that use case studies in a "traditional" manner might typically begin by presenting the student with background information on the subject matter for the course (e.g., the role of trust in conflict resolution or the processes of small group problem-solving). Students would then be given a case to study and to "solve" that involves dynamics particular to that

subject matter. This paper reports an investigation which changed that basic process one way: by inserting into the middle of it the additional step of having students write case studies germane to the subject matter being discussed. Part of our thesis is that having students write the case study enhances its experiential effects.

Braithwaite and Wood (2000) argue that the conceptual knowledge students get from traditional courses is not necessarily accompanied by “practical skills that allow them to analyze communication in personal relationships and to make informed choices about their own interaction . . .” (p. ix). Use of case studies can enhance that educational experience (see, for example, Borden, 1998; Brislin, 1997; Hess, 1981; Kleinfeld, 1990; Merseth, 1994). “Case studies, an excellent bridge between theory and application, can be used at all class levels to promote learning. Regardless of the model, case studies teach analytical and critical thinking skills” (Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999, p. 32). Braithwaite and Wood (2000) point to the distinguished history of the use of case studies in teaching and they advocate the use of case studies to help students actively engage a particular set of circumstances, improve the sophistication of their reflections, and practice the application of theory and research to their lives. The course in great group breakdowns that was germinal for this paper was an attempt to accomplish exactly that, and more. Because students had to go through the processes of identifying critical incidents in a breakdown and of writing articulate descriptions in the form of case studies of the breakdowns, they received an enhanced case study experience.

Can student write case studies?

We know empirically that the answer to this question can be “yes.” We know this because students in the class described in this paper were able to write five cases each. They

accomplished the feat alone and in teams. They wrote personal cases, historical cases, fictional cases, and cases they found in film and literature. In addition, for a full year prior to the special class that is the basis for this paper, the first author taught classes in small group discussion in which he regularly asked students to write personal examples of their own experiences with the communication breakdowns discussed in class.

In addition to the empirical success we have had with the method, there is an argument that suggests that students *ought* to be able to write case studies. It is that, assuming the students are sufficiently mature,⁴ their personal experiences with groups and with group failure should give them the most basic resource necessary to begin the process of constructing a case study—a personal experience with a dysfunctional group. Why is that the fundamental foundation piece? Because *a personal experience with failure provides a salient case about which to wonder*. Wondering means that one must come up with a way to describe what happened. Consequently, wondering about an instance means beginning the process of trying to make sense of it. It means thinking in narrative, episodic form about something that matters to one personally, even if one cannot understand most or much of the plot. Such thinking requires the initial, minimal elaboration necessary to change what may have been just a strongly negative affective experience into a useful cognitive form. Students have a workable base for writing a case study because they have in their own personal experience the ability to recall and describe cases of group dysfunction about which they can wonder, “what went wrong?”

Because of this base in personal experience, they should be able to begin the learning process by describing one of their own experiences with group failure. The salience and immediacy that comes with such personal experience should help them with the task and, later, also help them try to write a case study of another’s group. This is because the success at

describing one case ought to give educationally valuable momentum to tasks dealing with less immediate group dysfunctions—e.g., the kind they see in a movie, read about in a poem or short story, perhaps even read about in a history book. The quality of the case study that they might write is not the point (unless they want to write a book on or of case studies). The point is that they might learn more or better by trying to write the case than they could learn by trying to solve it. The problem in any good case is more immediate and salient than is the solution. So, start by writing about the problem. Having to write about it helps build an understanding of it.

Can we anticipate benefits to the process of writing case studies?

Although case studies were developed as a training tool, they ought also to have concomitant values to the constructor of the case study. First among these are the benefits of enhancing one's critical capacities and one's critical thinking skills. Crucial critical capacities include the abilities to describe, interpret, and evaluate what is actually going on in a case. For instance, the rhetorical aspects of the case include the persuasive or strategic efforts of individuals to influence group outcomes. The rhetorical critic, then, can describe what is happening in the symbolic, strategic reality of a group. This description begins the processes of interpretation and evaluation of the effectiveness of those symbolic actions.

The first author has used a variety of techniques in the past to help students become better critics; in fact, becoming a critical consumer of the talk that occurs within a small group is one of the objectives of the regular group discussion course. The assumption is that a good critic can then become a better problem-solver in a group and a better creator of his or her own communication in a group. Regardless of the latter two outcomes, becoming a critic is thought to be of value because of the potential the student then has to employ their understanding of

groups in order to better understand their world. For instance, one assignment in other sections of the small group course is to have students write a consultation paper in which they observe a group for a semester and write an essay regarding what is going particularly well or poorly⁵ in the group. Other than a *gestalt* impression, most students are not particularly adept at the critical processes necessary for accomplishing this assignment. They struggle to describe what is going on and they jump to the first interpretation and evaluation that springs to mind, usually more out of their own orientation and general biases than from any clear understanding of what is happening in the group. Only with probing, for instance, are they able to actually describe the group interaction dynamics. Interpretation and evaluation can be even harder to accomplish. The process of writing case studies was designed in part to enhance such critical skills as the ability to describe, interpret, and evaluate what is occurring in a group.

Critical thinking skills, in extension, involve the identification of the means available to the people in the case study and the choices that they make. Beyond what is happening in a group and whether it is working or not, critical thinking means imagining and suggesting alternatives courses for the group. In fact, the author of a case study has two layers of such critical thinking to accomplish. First, s/he must be able to see what options for strategic action are available to the people in the case whether they can see those options themselves or not. The second layer occurs as the author must make her or his own strategic choices. Because a case study is never “to scale,” it will always be only a representation of the action that is important in an instance; not *all* of the action can be included. So, the author must see the available material there is to include and then make choices to include some of it and to exclude other aspects of it from the written case. As we shall report in the effects section, there were lively debates regarding what were good choices for inclusion: debates that made manifest the critical thinking

skills employed by the writing of the case studies. Writing a case that does not make evident any of the strategic options that are available or any of the choices that follow from them suggests the absence of this skill in play. Students find cases that do not evidence such options to be frustrating and they work hard to write better cases as a consequence.

Because there are always more data and ideas to choose among than there is space available for making a particular case, critical thinking skills are necessarily exercised in the process of writing case studies. As critics, students have to learn to capably identify, interpret, and evaluate available data. In extension, the critical thinking process raises issues regarding the decision to include or exclude those data when writing the case. Students need to develop the analytical skills involved in selecting some data or breakpoints or critical incidents while rejecting others. We are not claiming that critical thinking skills are entirely different from the general critical skills mentioned just a moment ago. We are suggesting that there is an additional set of mental process involved after describing, interpreting, and evaluating aspects of the case. In part, those additional mental processes, what we call critical thinking skills, are found in making the possibilities that did not manifest during a case, evident from the case nonetheless. In part, those mental processes are found in students making good decisions regarding inclusion and case construction.

A second benefit to writing case studies is improving one's ability to synthesize data over time and to present the result in a lucid and cogent form as a case that represents its problems well. The first idea focused generally on the analytical skills involved in criticism and in critical thinking. Both require analysis—the ability to break a situation down to its component parts and to understand the nature and importance of each of them and what alternatives there might be to the status quo they represent. To bring these parts back together again requires a synthesis—the

generation of new understanding based on a combination of the author's creative efforts and what were previously just serial data or components from a particular case. In short, to describe, interpret, evaluate, and select for inclusion in a case requires analytical ability. A synthesis should make a lucid and cogent argument out of that analysis, one which represents the case while not reducing it to an oversimplified and irrelevant husk. The synthesis is a story that makes sense of all the data as something from which one can learn valuable lessons. Such a story has heuristic value; it is a learning story. It must be written down and/or presented in a clear and powerful form that represents, without being reductionistic, the dramatic action in the case. In a sense, constructing and writing the case study becomes an opportunity to develop the skills involved in creating a representative anecdote.⁶ A clear and compelling argument of this sort can have great pedagogical importance. The skill involved is enhanced by having to study and write about whole cases. That is an improvement over being limited to a more atomistic study of particular group dynamics, discussion methods, or the general nature of systems. It takes great observational and deductive skills to be able to see and synthesize the details of interaction that can lead the group to a position where they are breakdown-conducive. Students who learn such skills will be much more in charge of (and can be much more intentional regarding the on-going processes involved in) the success of their future group efforts.

The third and final benefit is one's ability to identify and describe the critical incidents involved in group breakdown. One cannot write case studies unless one is able to identify critical incidents. Students learn experientially from the process of identifying such critical incidents. To do that requires one to understand which dynamics might be critical. That means having and using a basic understanding of group dynamics and dysfunctions. "Critical incidents" are part of a research methodology (see footnote #3). The challenge is to cut through

the plethora of data sources and stimuli available to the social scientist in order to get directly at the meat of the participants' experience. In the research methodology, that is accomplished by having participants describe what, in particular, was a critical point of change or importance or decision for them in the life of the group. In the original sense (see footnote # 3), critical incidents are the stories told by participants which they identify as typical of what is good or bad, strong or weak; in short, what is essential to know about in order to understand their group experience. Although the writer of case studies may not have access to actual participants' stories of critical incidents, the necessity remains to identify what is essential to know in order to understand the group experience.

Perhaps it should go without saying that students in a small group class are to be learning about group dynamics, but the identification of such critical incidents is the one place where an instructor can determine whether students are making subject matter applications to their work. In other words, a student could accomplish each of the other two outcomes without demonstrating competence in their understanding of small group dynamics. They could, for instance, demonstrate all of the above by focusing on the rhetorical aspects of cultural inculcation of patriarchal values in a group. The link to understanding small group dynamics is made as students learn to identify the particular kind of data that can be associated with important group dynamics. After the manner of Cohen and Smith (1976), we consider those data "critical incidents."

Description of Course Processes

The class that is the focus of this paper was designed in a manner that allowed us to test the arguments we are making above. A brief description of the class will be helpful in making

this point. At the university where this project took place, our Department and the College of Arts and Sciences agreed to allow the first author to offer an honors seminar in “Great Group Breakdowns” and to make that course available to honors students in all of the university’s colleges.⁷ There was an excellent response to the opportunity and the class filled with fifteen students (the desired size for honors classes).⁸ Prior to the first day of class, students had very limited access to information regarding the course. They knew the course title, “Great Group Breakdowns in History,” and a brief paragraph description that explained the course focus on group communication breakdown was provided in the honors course catalog. Other than the fact that the course would fulfill the same general education requirements as the regular section of small group discussion course and provide honors program credits, there was no other information available to them. On the first day of class, students were given detailed descriptions in the syllabus⁹ and everyone who had signed up for the class elected to stay and subsequently completed the semester. For the first eight weeks of class, lectures provided background information regarding group dynamics and typical group breakdowns. Breakdowns were selected from extant literature and organized by the first author into general forms such as: process-based breakdowns, task-based breakdowns, conformity-based breakdowns, and individual-based breakdowns.¹⁰ About 2-3 weeks into the semester, after identifying their own tendencies for miscommunication and after reflecting on a few instances when groups that were important in their own lives had broken down, students were partially prepared to take on the first case study writing assignment.

For the first case study, each student was asked to write about a group breakdown that s/he had personally experienced. After they had each completed the case study and had shared their work with their peers, they were asked to respond to several prompts in order to determine

what had been learned from their experience trying to write the case. A summary of their answers was compiled for their consideration at the next class session and a synthesis of those answers and the authors' thoughts is provided in the following section of this paper. Students then prepared two more cases, still working alone with only the summary of their own advice to guide them. Their second assignment was to write a case of some group breakdown they found in a feature film or novel. Their third effort was to write a case about a great group breakdown in history. Students were asked after each of these cases to add to or to subtract from the lists of effects and advice they had generated after writing the first case. During class discussions regarding the process, a number of key arguments ensued among them such as: Should a case description go all the way through to the end where group members die or are permanently estranged? Should a case be written in vague and general form or with lots of details? How do you best focus the reader on important details—use narrative form; set the case as a play; provide historical facts only, to reduce bias; and so forth. Should the case be just one instance or a chronology, provide longitudinal data or snapshot?

We moved from writing and reacting to the case studies in a vacuum to developing our set of criteria for what it takes to be a good case study and what advice we would give authors of case studies. From there we started having students write the cases together, continually trying to refine the advice we were giving ourselves. Students wrote the next three case studies in teams of 2-4 members. The first of these was another historic case and this is the first one we also tried to solve in the class.¹¹ Students shared their cases, picked the best one, divided into groups, and tried to solve it. They were asked to imagine that they were consultants trying to get the job to do an intervention for the group featured in the case. They were told that the group who had authored the case would make the decision to hire one firm (team) or another. They

were allowed 15 minutes to solve the case (although no group took more than 90 seconds to do so) and as much time as they liked to ask questions of each other. Frustration resulted as the conversation shifted once again to what should and should not be in a case study, and what is and is not the “correct” form.

Two general changes in tactics resulted from the attempt to write and solve the fourth case. First, the students decided that they needed a clearer sense of the purpose of the next case study before they wrote it. We then agreed that the purpose was to create a worthwhile puzzle for a potential reader. It was important to them to know that the audience for their cases needed to be provided a puzzle to solve. A good puzzle would have evidence of the multiple causes and the equifinality of any system in its clues and accompanying its solution. However, there ought to be ways to tell, from the case, which answers are the better ones and which are not.

Second, because of continued disputes about what a case study should look like, we changed the upcoming fifth case into a fictional case¹². “Make it the best case study you can,” the students were told, “and that should help us refine our technique. Then, if we succeed with that, we will be able to try again to write an historic case study of similar quality.” This, we hoped, would limit the variables that had confused our earlier attempts. The goal was to shift the arguments away from concerns about technique and form to concerns about case quality.

The fifth case study was the final one that everyone in the class completed (though some also completed a sixth case in the process of trying to complete another assignment). The fictional case allowed students the opportunity to create a narrative with the kinds of group breakdowns in which they were most interested. At this point, it becomes necessary to merge the discussion of course process into the discussion of results, because students both generated

advice on how to improve the process and also changed their approaches in response to that advice. Therefore, we will now move on to the discussion of the results of this project.

Results: Improving the Educational Process

Although advice exists on how to write case studies,¹³ we worked without that advice in the hopes of not constraining creative tendencies by observing extant conventions. Other than the brief description provided in the syllabus (see footnote #8), students had to sort out for themselves what a case study consists of and how to write it. What follows are results of this process found in two forms. First, a synthesis is provided of the effects of participating in the process. Second, a synthesis is provided of advice the students and instructor developed for future efforts to write case studies.

Self-described effects from writing case studies

This investigation used four data gathering opportunities for students to describe the effects they experienced from writing the case studies. After they completed the writing of their first, second, and third cases, students were given a set of prompts that included asking them how to improve the process and to describe the benefits one could receive from having to write a case study. At the end of the semester, they were asked again about the effects of their experience. That last time they also were asked what were the benefits of writing case studies and what were the negatives involved in such a process.¹⁴ What follows is a synthesis of their answers from across these opportunities. It was not within the purview of this investigation to identify how typical or potent each effect was, but we can provide the following results as the first step in

developing a grounded theory of the effects of writing case studies on the understanding of group dysfunction.

Notable because of its brevity is the list of negatives that the students generated at the end of the semester. However, a number of students (representing fairly broad consensus across the class, in fact) indicated that they had experienced frustration and difficulty at the start of the assignment, because they had felt ill-equipped to write the first cases. Their comments clearly exemplify the process of learning on their own, without a pre-determined process or structure to follow. The class was designed intentionally to produce such a learning environment.¹⁵ Students also responded to the prompt that asked about negative effects with comments such as, “Although I had trouble grasping the concept at first, the process of writing case studies was beneficial to me, in the end” and “I do not think the process of writing case studies was bad for the class, and I know I personally benefited from it. Writing case studies was a new kind of writing for me, and although I was very challenged by it, I enjoyed it.”

Notable because of its variety, length, and consistency throughout the semester is the list of positive consequences that students generated in response to being asked to name benefits that accrue for the writer/creator of a case study. The following list is no more mutually exclusive than were the items in our list of arguments for why writing case studies should be a good experience. And there are similarities in the students’ responses to the arguments we made above.

The first benefit is that students felt especially well equipped, from learning how to write cases, when it came to solving the cases. “Then, when it came time to solve case studies, I quickly picked out the pertinent information and solved the case. Writing the case studies enabled me to quickly pick out the information that contributed to the breakdowns in the case

studies I solved.” This comment ought to give pause to any instructor who likes to use case studies in class but who believes students are not capable of writing good cases. Regardless of the quality of the student-written cases, it appears that the process of writing them is a good tool for learning how to work with and solve other cases. This first benefit is rather conclusionary in that we do not know from it why the students felt better equipped to solve future cases. That can be addressed through explanations provided with the remaining benefits.

A second benefit, obviously related to the first, is that writing cases helped students improve their analytical lenses. Students noted that writing case studies is a good way to learn to cut to the heart of the dynamics involved in a group by having to describe them in a way that others can sort out as including all the aspects that are particularly important for improving the group. By the end of the semester, students were more detailed in their description of this effect: “[It] required us to look at the essential parts of breakdown, not just the situations but at multiple details that didn’t seem significant at first but later proved to be important.” “It forced me to look at real life situations and analyze them. This will help me to recognize breakdowns before they occur in groups I am participating in in the future.”

Related to this second benefit, students observed that one gets a better sense of the whole scene by having to write a case study. This is preferable to a view filtered through just one or two key dynamics. “I had to think about the construction/sequence of events that would lead to problems in order to write the paper. The sequences helped me see what causes groups to break down.” “It made the process of how a breakdown occurs easier to follow. It also made me more able to point out the breakdown.” “Using personal experiences and my own examples I learned on a more hands on level.” [Having to write case studies] “taught me what to look for to find the causes of communication breakdowns. Once I began to get a feel for what to look for, in terms

of the causes of breakdowns, I began to notice patterns in what was causing the breakdowns in the case studies I wrote or solved. In this way, writing case studies also helped me to see patterns in small group communication breakdowns.”

A closely related fourth benefit is that students (as authors and as readers) learn to troubleshoot, to identify “hot spots” in the interaction processes in a group before tragedy unfolds. These are valued skills because, students wrote, it is important to learn how to identify where breakdowns are about to happen during the process, not just by looking at the outcomes. Prevention requires the ability to predict adverse outcomes in advance of their fruition. Such troubleshooting requires the case writer to look objectively at the situation. To discover reasons for communication breakdowns, one must be able to understand why various people (including the student in his/her own groups) may have been partially responsible for the breakdown. Students even listed, as a benefit, increased awareness and sensitivity to (the effects of) personality types other than their own. Objectivity is helpful when one is oriented toward learning how to prevent similar problems in the future.

A fifth benefit of authoring case studies is one’s enhanced ability to apply new knowledge to one’s current groups. The writer learns from another group’s mistakes. Examining the circumstances of one breakdown helps one adjust to future experiences. Writing a case forces one to closely examine the dysfunctions that can cause breakdowns, and that better equips one to foresee them in real life situations. Several students commented that, during the process of trying to write the case studies together and while trying to solve the generic forms problem, their groups experienced every form of group breakdown they were studying. That they could identify the breakdowns in the here-and-now of their own problem-solving group experiences is corroboration for their own claims of the benefits they gleaned from writing the

case studies themselves. It also provides an exemplar of experiential education. Real world experience was replaced by the vicarious experience of writing about cases of breakdowns. The resulting increase in the ability to see patterns emerge, to be able to identify generic forms of group breakdown across many different instances, worked as if the authors had actually had a number of life experiences with protracted group breakdowns.

Finally, there were a number of comments late in the semester about a general competency in writing case studies. Students claimed as a benefit that they learned more about writing case studies, indicating that they actually valued that process knowledge in addition to what writing the cases taught them about group dysfunction. Apparently, though only one student in the class has career plans that include consulting or teaching, the skills involved in being able to write a case study are valued by the students. We think that that is because they can easily be applied to a number of other contexts in which the analysis and accurate description of a situation would be a necessary competency. Students wrote that the process was “[worthwhile because it was good to] help to create what a case study is; allowing for deeper understanding of incongruous writing; personalizing the studies being discussed and getting a deeper understanding of cases and of how to do better analysis [of cases].” “Once I understood what a case study should entail, I began to analyze the situations I was writing about in order to only include information that would aide in solving the case study.” “Working with the material enabled me to get a better understanding of the mechanics of a case study.” “It taught me how to be concise in my writing. It was interesting to discover (by writing my own) what information should/shouldn’t be included in a case study.”

In addition to the above consequences, the following section of advice on writing case studies supports the conclusion that writing case studies does in fact serve appropriate

pedagogical functions. This is because the following makes it clear that students become more analytical about the group processes they are describing. For instance, students engage in active debate about how to describe cases and about how to improve the process of writing case studies. Students were able to disagree in some detail about what they felt was necessary to know about a particular group or about groups in general in order to make good predictions regarding potential group outcomes or to provide dependable advice for improving group processes. Therefore the following advice provides one last data set in support of the argument that good outcomes result from having to write case studies.

Advice for Writing Case Studies

Although advice exists¹⁶ regarding the construction and use of case studies, our focus was on how one goes about the process of writing the cases. After students had finished writing the first one and shared their work with their peers, they were asked to respond to several prompts in order to determine what we had learned from their experience. Their answers and the authors' are synthesized below. Because of the reports of early confusion regarding the process in the class described in this paper, future attempts to use the process of student-written case studies would probably benefit from incorporating the following advice into the assignment description.

How do you describe a case study? Students made two kinds of general descriptions in response to this prompt, the first dealing with the narrative nature and form of a good case study, the second dealing with the appropriate content. *A case study is . . . storytelling with a scientific twist because of the objectivity taken by the author and because of the need for inclusion of the germane, accurate details. It provides a riddle complete with all the information needed to solve it. That information provides a picture of all the important dynamics and personalities involved*

in a major breakdown occurrence in the group's life without all of the familiar cues—proper nouns, actual dates or locations—which carry the baggage or connotations that are attached to actual events or people.

Case studies provide concise observations about a group with the intent of gaining the knowledge and perspective that enables the reader to make predictions about the group and to generate advice for helping the group improve its processes. Primarily a narrative, it must also provide an objective look at possible problem situations; the circumstances are set up for later evaluation, but no conclusions are drawn in the study itself. The narrative provides an objective snapshot of group dynamics, individual personalities, and relationships in order that the reader may develop a general idea of group communication processes. It foreshadows breakdowns without fully describing them or drawing a conclusion about how to prevent them or about how they will play out. In short, a case study provides a concise written account of a situation with the capacity for miscommunication.

How do you instruct people to write a case study? Central to their advice was the issue of how far to go in the process of describing a case. This led to further clarification of what they felt is the appropriate content for a case study. *To write a case study you should . . .* try to tell the whole story right up to the point where things have started to go badly wrong but not to the point where the reasons for the going bad are completely clear, nor to the point where solutions are obvious, and nor to the point where the moral of the story is entirely clear. Set up a problem in narrative form using details that would be inconspicuous to the casual eye (but that are evident—and therefore, resources—to the trained eye). Because interpersonal interaction is key, including key pieces of dialog can be very helpful. Descriptions of the case should also include details of

the situation, the roles of participants, personality traits of key members, and qualitative descriptions of group atmosphere and communication.

Describe the goals of the group and of its members. Include descriptions of key personalities and interpersonal relationships as well as group norms and individual members' roles. Describe what is going wrong well enough for the reader to analyze how it went wrong. The purpose of the case study is to allow persons not directly involved to comprehend the situation and determine possible factors or causes of group communication breakdowns. The case study is neither time- nor place-specific. It includes names for the sake of clarity and ease of reading but it changes actual names for confidentiality. It remains impartial. It is well written. It actively sets up the situation, and provides enough information for relevant inferences to be drawn without making conclusions about the actual communication breakdown. It provides explanations of the situation and membership that have a direct impact on miscommunication.

In short, students described a good case study as one that captures the reader with the puzzle of it all and makes them want to know more about the case. It should generate a sense of intrigue in trying to solve the problems alluded to in the case. It focuses on people and the interaction between them especially as parts of that talk help to construct the impending pitfall and group breakdown.

What pitfalls are there to avoid when attempting to write a case study? Students had two general concerns. The first had to do with their orientation to the case; the second had to do with writing a lucid and useful case. To be properly oriented, students reminded each other to: Be objective and stick to the facts. Avoid drawing premature conclusions. Fully explain group characteristics. Make some (minimal) judgements about personalities, but do not resort to your

own bias about how people ought to behave or what they ought to value. Make sure your own opinions and biases stay out of it. Try to remain personally aloof from the study—there is a tendency to include value judgements.

To write a clear and useful case, students encouraged each other to make sure the story is understandable and readable. Keep it concise and watch information overload. Stick to pertinent information and write in a logical, clear order. There is a tendency to overgeneralize, so give good detailed description of relevant details, but avoid irrelevancies.

More than the above lessons were learned about the process of writing case studies but these are the most basic answers to the original question, “What do students learn from the process of writing case studies?” What follows are some of the concomitant things we learned from watching the students sort through the process. Based on class experiences we have the following additional advice:

- 1) Make certain that the case you pick represents a group breakdown and not some “errant member becomes ax murderer” or “mother nature strikes back” sort of calamity. There is a tendency to get intrigued by such cases because of a sense of the macabre or the fascination with strong characters. However, it must be the way the group interacts that gets them into trouble or the ability to solve the case is diminished. Some relationships, parent to child for instance, do not have “typical” group dynamics in the sense of greatest value to this course. They are a primary, not a task group. Besides, the power imbalance inherent in such a relationship means that democratic processes and consensus, which are typically values of an all-channel group, are not typical and may not be appropriate.
- 2) Including particular dialog that exemplifies the problems and strengths of the relationship will help the reader “see” how the conflict or cohesion or other dynamic is “constructed”

by the group. Unfortunately, the tendency is for students to appreciate the value of dialog but to not include it anyway. Point out that the use of actual dialog can also address the bias issue because the words of the players speak for themselves. Students need strong encouragement to continue trying to include key and useful dialog. Dialog centered on efforts to enhance the maintenance function of the group can be particularly revealing and helpful.

- 3) End the case when a crisis has started to erupt. For instance, “she stormed out shouting ‘I’ll never come back’” provides an exigency for action on the part of the group to address their situation, whereas, “she stormed out and killed herself on the way home” or “she moved to France and never saw them again” does not. The latter satiates student curiosity but the former stokes it.
- 4) Providing specific group and/or individual goals is helpful to the reader/consultant. Describing efforts to achieve the goals is helpful too. Include a description of personality conflicts. In fact, you might write a description of each character—as an individual case study of sorts—before you write the actual case. This gives you a more complete feel for each character and makes it easier to do a good job to write narrative and dialog including the character. Not all of the details from the individual case need to be placed in the actual case study you write. Make certain to point out any distinguishing characteristics of the group. For instance, it matters whether they are a family, co-workers, or some other type of group. As a general rule, do not use any kind of group except democratic, task groups for reasons mentioned above. Make up names for characters and countries or groups so that the reader doesn’t have to work through “Country X” or “Person Y” kinds of symbols. Including background problems, not just the current crisis, is helpful.

Finally, as we watched students attempt to construct the case studies, we learned that four additional issues will need to be discussed in any similar future effort. First, with regard to details—how much to include and how to include them? For instance, putting case details into a narrative made the reading of them easier but care needs to be given to not lose the case in the story. Students at times started to enjoy the mystery more than the case, obscuring the latter with irrelevancies (for the purposes of the assignment) regarding the former. With some of our attempts, especially the historic group breakdowns, the necessary details were hard to get or were not available at all. For instance, history does a better job of documenting catastrophic outcomes than it does of documenting the interpersonal and group communication dynamics that led to the great group breakdown. There is an open debate as to whether a good case study includes the actual breakdown or just all the details that would allow the reader to predict the kind of breakdown. If the breakdown is to be included, how much detail is to be provided? We generally agreed, though, that we wanted to avoid telling the “end” or moral of the story. No snapshot of a group tells the whole story. Consequently, cases that include material over time in the group life are better than “one-shot” accounts. We found that the more cryptic or incomplete the case study, the less useful it is for testing the users’ knowledge of specific applications of the material. But, it might also increase the opportunity for creative and divergent thinking and interpretation if it is more cryptic. Regardless of the above, the more effort the writer spends trying to get as many useful details into the case, the more the writer will probably learn from the process.

A second issue has to do with the source of the cases. Some of our students preferred writing cases out of history, others preferred working from literature and film, still others preferred writing from personal experience, and a few preferred the fictional case. There was no

consensus regarding preferred context or assignment option but there were strong feelings regarding the superiority of one's own preference. We note that there are benefits to shared experience. For instance, having several people read about and develop a case study had its merits. Having a case based on a commonly experienced stimulus (e.g. we all saw the same movie or read the same book) had its merits. Indeed, the fictional case was one option that allowed a shared experience of creation with the only constraints being the culturally developed sense of what is and is not group breakdown.

Third, as reported above, we found that including in the case some dialog between the principals in the group was a helpful way to "show" the dynamics as they were being constructed through group talk. In no case, however, were the students able to go far enough with dialog for the whole construction of a problem to be evident. And, in historical cases, actual dialog, which provided the symbolic constructions of conflict or strategic response, typically is missing altogether. Even when causes are identified or attributed, they are often reported without the kind of communication-based details that make writing such a case study a do-able process. Students found themselves having to invent dialog.¹⁷ There were a few attempts that focused the breakdown on the misinterpretation of a key word or phrase, but other than those, actual talk was rarely at the center of the historic case and nor was it ever provided in sufficient detail to help the reader learn of the problems in the case through the talk of the group members.

Fourth, there is an open debate as to how much of the developing process of case writing future students ought go through. Advice on writing cases is abundant, ought it be provided? For that matter, this class could have been given a lot more detail on how to write case studies from, for instance, the Pace University Center for Case Studies in Education. Further, it might be useful to discuss the fundamentals of narrative or of dramatic form or to provide Burke's

Pentad as a precursor to asking students to write cases so that they can consider including relevant parts of: act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose. In the end, each instructor will have to decide how much of the way needs to be paved for her/his own students.

Discussion

Braithwaite and Wood (2000) argued for the use of case studies in teaching courses in interpersonal communication. We believe this paper makes a strong argument that one might successfully incorporate the writing of case studies in small group communication classes. As was articulated earlier, the quality of the cases is not important unless we wanted to use them at some later time. The quality of the experience is what is to be valued from this technique.

This paper is about the benefits of the process involved in having students write case studies of small group communication breakdowns. We found, essentially, that there are good reasons to believe that such a process is worthwhile, including consequences reported by the students themselves. We developed additional suggestions for how to accomplish such an assignment. Future efforts will need to address some of the questions that are still open debates. In particular, research could focus on the optimal amount of instruction to provide students at the start of their attempt to generate cases. Research could also be extended to address the benefits from various forms that might differ according to whether one is writing or using the case as the primary focus of a class assignment. Finally, the effects of writing case studies could be tested further. In particular, it would be useful to know how typical are the good and bad effects identified to this process. It would also be useful to study how important such effects are to the educational experience of each student.

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¹ See, for example: Benbasat, Goldstein, & Mead (1987); Braithwaite & Wood (2000); Christensen & Hansen (1981); Eisenhardt (1989); Ray (1996); Silverman, Welty, & Lyon (1992); Yin (1984); or The Pace University Center for Case Studies in Education, Pace University School of Education, White Plains, NY.

² Breakpoints represent developmental transitions; they signal that a new trajectory has occurred. There are multiple possible breakpoints in the life of a group (Poole 1981; 1983a; 1983b). Poole (1983a) identifies three types of breakpoints: *normal breakpoints* (such as topic shifts and planning periods) which help the pace of the discussion; *delays* (during which a group recycles through a developmental process or analysis) which are holding patterns that help the group continue its task; and *disruptions* (conflict which can redirect the group's activities and may require a major reorientation to return group to task or which can lead to failure, i.e., the group does not complete its task and future major readjustment may be required as a result) which change group direction entirely.

³ See Flanagan J.C. (1954) for a description of the critical incident technique. Cohen and Smith (1976) explain the critical incident methodology as it applies to the study of leadership in small groups. "A critical incident is defined as the confrontation of a group leader by one or more members, in which an explicit or implicit opinion, decision, or action is demanded of him. It may also be an observed conversation, a confrontation among members, an event taking place, or a period of silence in which an expectation or demand is made of the leader" (p. 114). "Whatever form the critical incident takes, the group leader is faced with a number of 'choice points' or alternatives in the context and style of his possible responses . . . , with each response the group leader uses he simultaneously

constructs alternative universes, opens new branches of group movement while inhibiting others, and blocks still other pathways” (p. 114). “The critical-incident concept evolved with the observation that certain critical situations emerge and replot themselves time and again in different groups and at different development stages” (p. 115). As a kind of summary statement, this class and this paper are generally concerned with the solicitation and description of critical incidents as they are manifest in the written case study.

⁴ In the Situational Theory of leadership, the question of competence is addressed in a useful manner by placing the focus for the answer in terms of group and individual maturity. Krayer (1988) studied group maturity in the classroom using Hersey and Blanchard’s (1988) maturity concept. Essentially, such maturity has two components: (a) the group or individual’s ability to do the work, which translates to having the requisite knowledge, skill, and experience to do the work; and (b) the willingness to take on the task, which is a measure of the motivation, confidence, and commitment manifested by group members. As will be evident from the course description, a small group communication class can be developed in a manner to increase the likelihood that students will meet these prerequisites. Consequently, students should have sufficient “individual maturity” to accomplish the task.

⁵ This form of “consulting work” is analogous to the “case study” approach used in teaching medical students—when they keep case studies of particular patients as they attempt diagnoses and regimens of response—but it is different than the kind of case study writing described as the basis for this paper. Although similar skills are employed by the consultant/student doctor and the writer of case studies, the involvement in trying to develop a “cure” through interaction with the “case” is different than thinking through and writing a descriptive story of the case. Writing a short story about two people and how they interact is different than being one of the people involved in the interaction. Even constructing a case study of one’s own group experience is different than working in the group as a member dedicated to improving the quality of the work the group is accomplishing. Although some of the case study literature is directed at the “student doctor model,” which includes such immediacy of engagement in the case, that is not the focus of this report.

⁶ The development of a representative anecdote is a method for better understanding symbolic action. It is not necessary that the anecdote be explicit in the case but only that it be representative and useful (Brummett, 1984, p. 4). The idea is that a writer must find a way to represent that which the data are indicating. S/he is attempting to trace the plot, action of characters, and scene through the use of a representative story or symbol. The quality of the representative analysis is a function of the anecdote’s ability “to incorporate many or most of the terms or particulars of discourse into its plots, dramatis personae, etc.” (Brummett, 1984, p. 5). “[T]he central problem faced . . . is that of constructing a representative symbol which reduces a text without being reductionistic, without omitting or distorting either the explicit details or the implicit principles of a text” (Conrad, 1984, p. 97). “Images, ideas, terms and principles are arranged in a hierarchical structure. At its apex is a central, synthetic construct which logically contains the matrix of conceptual interrelationships. . . . A critic may express this construct in a variety of different ways—a symbol . . . , an illustration . . . , or a single term. . . . The specific character of the anecdote is less important than its function in the critical process—representing the symbolic form” Conrad, 1984, p. 97).

⁷ Each college at Kansas State University has its own honors program with its own criteria for admission. Because there is strong pressure on regular (non-honors) sections of the small group discussion course, which is a favorite on campus for filling a second communication requirement mandated by several of the colleges, part of the agreement with Arts & Sciences was that Great Group Breakdowns be allowed to serve the same general education and college requirements as the regular groups class.

⁸ N = 9 females & 6 males who represented 11 different academic majors and a variety of academic minors and all academic classes (2 frosh, 2 seniors, 4 sophomores, 7 juniors). Among those in the class were students who were delighted by the course processes (students writing case studies), those who were confused or skeptical or reserved in their judgements, and those who thought that the process was a set of bad ideas foisted upon them. All, however, did the task and many became increasingly engaged by it.

⁹ From the Syllabus: “Half of the class is devoted to understanding how groups dysfunction by looking at actual groups, from the mundane to the historically significant, and figuring out what characterizes their failures . . . This class is working on a set of case studies that will capture the essential, generic forms of group failure. Students will work together and alone to identify instances of group failure and to write case study descriptions of them As

individuals and in teams we will write case studies. As groups and as a class we will critique these cases. These experiences will help us develop and improve a set of criteria for evaluating case studies and will also be informative as we determine what quality and amount of work is necessary for completion of this half of the course.”

“For a much more complete description of the theoretical and methodological considerations involved in this task, please refer to the article regarding those issues handed out in class. Until then, here is a very brief description of the nuts and bolts for writing a case study. We will further refine these instructions in class through the course of the semester. For now, however: The case study is a well written, carefully proofed & edited, single, typed page containing the details necessary for a consultant to be able to diagnose the communication problems that might be occurring in the group. The case study is significantly different than an historical report or synopsis of a particular group’s problems in the following ways:”

- “The case study provides details that might appear uninteresting to the casual observer but that can be used by the group communication consultant to identify potential problems and to make a case for trying different approaches for improving the group. Class topics suggest a whole variety of dynamics that could be important including: nonverbal issues—allocation of space, use of time & touch, and so forth; hidden agendas; personality quirks; different processing preferences; and so on. Use the whole page to provide such details.”
- “The case study omits value-laden bias on how the case should be read or solved and it does not include any suggestions the authors might make regarding what to look for in the group or what the group might realistically do to do a better job.”
- “The case study respects confidentiality by not including names or personal details that do not pertain to the reader’s ability to understand and work the case. When such a detail is important to the reader, it is placed in generic, impersonal form including the use of a different name, description at the next level of abstraction (from the personal to the class), and proper nouns and names describing the actual group are removed.”

“For instance: John, a 26 year old supervisor at KSU, has just been put in charge of quality control on all construction projects. In that position, he has to work in daily contact with a group of folks who hate him including several he supervises and his new boss. The most irritated people on the list are: Bob, because he wanted the job John eventually got; Sally, because she trained John; Susan, because she has been at KSU in the same division for 26 years and is tired of younger people taking over everywhere; and, Paul, John’s supervisor (who shares his office) because Paul has a drinking problem and is afraid John, who has a history with Al-Anon, will spot the problem.

Might Become: Phil, a young supervisor at a large, mid-western university has just been given a job where he is in charge of quality control on all construction projects. He has to work regularly as the supervisor of several people who did not want him to get the job including one other male who also applied for the job, the woman who trained Phil, and an employee with 26 years of seniority. Phil’s boss, who has to share an office space with him, did not want Phil hired because of personal problems he has which he is afraid Phil might be able to spot.”

¹⁰ Although the “breakdown” nomenclature is problematic in that it implies a mechanistic view of the communication process (i. e., communication is a “thing” that can “break down,” it is useful in that students easily grasp the key idea of “something gone awry” in the process. The first author is working on developing a taxonomic structure of all these “breakdowns” which is too extensive to include in this paper. The hope is to present the taxonomy in a future paper but interested readers may request a copy of it in its current form from the first author.

¹¹ Note: by “solve” we mean to be able, as a consultant, to suggest ways the group could use to improve itself and avert disaster. One problem with historic cases, of course, is that students already know how things turn out and some get a fatalistic view as a result that keeps them from being able to “solve” a case that history has already determined.

¹² A benefit to this approach was thought to be that it would allow focus to be on the creation and writing of the case rather than on the research necessary to find empirically important details. An argument against the fictional case was made that claimed such cases would be less useful and harder to write. The first objection was answered by claiming that the usefulness of the case was based on its quality, not its origins. That there are infinite possible details in a case, making a fictional one harder to write, was the second concern. This was answered by citing a basic tenet of genre criticism; that there may be infinite details but only a relatively small number of generally recurring forms of human action and strategic choice which the fictional or historic cases both would rely upon.

¹³ For example, Sypher (1990) suggests: (1) they should present a “chunk of reality,” focusing on real events in their real-life context; (2) they should have some elements of narration—a beginning and an end—but need not necessarily unfold chronologically; (3) they should be longitudinal, depicting a series of events with a past as well as a present; (4) the time structure should be clear, and usually the past tense is most appropriate; (5) the writer should usually remove himself or herself from the case, focusing more on the individuals’ or organization’s point of view; (6) they should have some elements of argumentation, including multiple sources of evidence for support; (7) they should be engaging, with suspense and drama; (8) they should be complete with background information, explicit boundaries, and multiple viewpoints; (9) they should focus on organizational problems and successes; (10) they should examine the taken for granted, as well as the significant and unusual aspects of organizational life.

¹⁴ After writing the first case study and sharing their work with their peers, the prompts included: “How do you describe a case study? A case study is . . .” “How do you instruct people to write a case study? To write a case study you should . . .” “A good case study . . .” “What pitfalls are there to avoid when attempting to write a case study?” “What benefits are there for the writer/creator of the case study?” At the end of the semester, students were asked to respond to three prompts: “The process of actually having to write case studies (instead of just getting case studies to solve) was worthwhile for me and/or for the class in the following ways . . .” “In particular, I learned the following from having to write those case studies . . .” “The process of actually having to write case studies was bad for me and/or for the class in the following ways . . .”

¹⁵ Essentially, students in the class were given a problem they did not know how to solve: write case studies of group communication dysfunction. How they would solve the problems, how they ought to solve the problems, was not something the instructor knew. A useful description of the pedagogical problem that faced students in this class was found in an e-mail exchange on an unrelated listserv. Here is how the kind of assignment used in this class can be described. These posts were shared with the students of the great groups breakdown class during one of the periods of their greatest frustration with the process—a week before they took over the class. From: William Kraemer <tkotr98@hotmail.com>, To: BURKE-L@SIU.EDU Subject: Re: confusion and deprivation and affect? Date: Thu, 28 Oct 1999 17:53:13 GMT “What happens on an affective level? Does the student move from apprehension to relief, for example? Confusion is essential to the destruction of routine response. Unless one starts out in a confused state, nothing useful is likely to happen. You will do what is expected, at best. If I can predict your response, it is probably a bore. The basic design for a class assignment is to throw the subject into a state where he “doesn’t know how to do it”. To produce this effect it suffices to prohibit, (on Pain of Death!), any particular expected strategy, it doesn’t matter which. A simple example: write a description of (someone, something, an event, whatever) without using any adjectives or adverbs . . . The student’s reaction is, first, “it can’t be done,” his second is to try to think how to do this “impossible” thing. That is the paradigmatic response you are looking for. Your students should (at first) throw up their hands! The most important criterion for an assignment is that you, the assigner, NOT know how it will be fulfilled.” From: Richard Stack <RSCatesby1@AOL.COM> To: BURKE-L@SIU.EDU Subject: Re: confusion, deprivation, affect, and bricolage. Date: Thu, 28 Oct 1999 22:37:10 EDT “The essential contrast, as I see it, is between the exercise where you can figure out what is expected of you, do it, and feel like a good boy, and the exercise where you cannot, and where you discover, to your delight, that no one can predict the outcome, and that you are being asked to actually do something rather than merely reproduce something. So the sequence is: anger at being deprived of an obvious solution>confusion and dismay> a sense that it cannot be done> searching about and trying things> a “having a go” which results in something unexpected, and possibly interesting> a sense of special satisfaction at having produced something which is your own and no-one else’s. I think the overall effect is surprise and pleasure that it is acceptable for you to do something which no-one had predicted you would do. And since it is just that special pleasure which is the source of creative work, one should, as a teacher, bend one’s pedagogical efforts in that direction.”

¹⁶ For instance, extant advice (presented at a workshop conducted by Hank Tkachuk for faculty at Concordia College, Moorhead, MN.) includes that “good” case studies: have multiple possible outcomes; challenge student assumptions; make people weigh what they have learned; are logical—not too open ended—in that there are clear reasons why data lead to the conclusion so that not “any” outcome is equally appropriate. In Tkachuk’s experience: the best case studies are written by the instructor of a class [or members of the class because they can target the case to the needs of the specific course content and context]; one ought not use fewer than three case studies in a course because the first couple are needed as warm ups; one ought use the cases repeatedly throughout the semester, allow a minimum of 15 minutes for a group to solve a case study, work on solving the cases in class, having three groups

of eight students each working on the same case works very well, have students talk about who were the most helpful contributors in their group's effort to solve the case study.

¹⁷ Such inventions may be becoming more accepted in historiography if the recent Reagan memoir, *Dutch*, is any indication.



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