

# **From War Stories to Critical Reflection: Learning through Case Studies in Graduate Leadership Courses**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is an exploration of how case studies may be employed to help graduate students build problem-solving and reflective skills in educational leadership courses. First, the authors examine how case studies are defined in the literature in general and within the field of educational leadership. The authors seek to understand how case studies have been theorized to support learning for adults in higher education. Specifically, the authors explore the possibilities for the use of case studies as a tool for meaningful learning in the specific setting of an online polysynchronous leadership course in graduate education. The authors investigate how case studies may be purposefully designed to support critical reflection in higher education. In this investigation, the authors provide a brief history of the field of educational leadership, highlighting a persistent tension between theory and practice in the field. The case study is explored as a vehicle for graduate student engagement in authentic learning, higher-order problem-solving and reflection in various fields. Finally, the authors consider the case study as a potential tool for the study of educational leadership, concluding that it has some potential as a meaningful amalgamation of theory, practice, and critical reflection.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Educational leadership is a human-to-human endeavor and an activity or commitment of significant importance to a stable, productive society. The people with whom an educational leader interacts in the course of a day, week or month are fairly diverse and the responsibilities of an educational leader for the safety of the students and faculty in his or her school or institution is significant. For some educational leaders, there is no such thing as a typical day. Interactions will include opportunities to influence and be influenced by students, teachers, instructors, staff, other administration, parents, bus drivers, social workers, police officers, and community leaders, and this is by no means an exhaustive list. It is not surprising, therefore, that an early discussion of the field of educational leadership finds that educational leadership touches on multiple fields: sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, and political science [1]. This multi-faceted perspective of the field can be positive or negative. According to Bates, while the diverse fields can be a sign of vitality, it can also highlight complexity or perhaps a sign of disunity in this field of study [1].

Research on educational leadership for K-12 schools [2] tells us that school leaders influence student learning in multiple ways. Leaders can improve teaching and learning in indirect ways by keeping the focus of the school on learning. The ways that leaders model their practice are significant, particularly when the leadership in a school is shared or distributed. Most successful leaders have a similar skill set: for example, they build a vision, set directions, understand and develop people, and redesign their organizations. Individual personalities, however, do account for a large proportion of the variation in effectiveness of different leaders [2]. Leaders' responses to different situations vary, and leaders differ in their capacity to manage their emotional responses to management challenges. In sum, leadership matters.

Research on the educational leadership role in the university or college setting shows that these roles are similarly significant and complex, to the point of being described as precarious [3]. The leaders of tertiary institutions need to set a vision and provide direction, and also manage change carefully while attending to multiple constituents such as the board, the senate, the student unions, the faculty associations and the municipalities. According to MacKinnon [3], university and college leaders are expected to demonstrate positive results but they lack the means of direct authority that is given to corporate leadership to accomplish tasks. He describes the university presidency as a precarious position. He also finds that there is a general lack of training and mentorship for university leadership in Canada which makes it a difficult role for someone who is frequently new to the institution as well as new to the position [3].

So while it is generally acknowledged that educational leadership is important and it draws on multiple academic fields, there has been considerable discussion about the existence of a theory of educational leadership. The role of theory in any academic field is to provide a general principle to guide actions. A theory might be arrived at through the systematic analysis of data as in grounded theory [4], or theory from another field might be applied in educational research. For example, schema theory has been used to understand and analyze principals' problem-solving skills [5].

The study of educational leadership is a significant scholarly endeavor even though the work of educational leadership may, at first, appear to be oriented more toward practice than toward theory. The place of theory and the significance of theory in the pursuit of learning about educational administration has been widely extolled and

debated for the past six decades, as discussed in the next section.

## 2.0 LEADERSHIP STUDIES

In order to come to an understanding of how students learn about educational leadership, it is helpful to review, albeit briefly, some history of this relatively young field. According to Heck and Hallinger [6], the field of educational administration at its nascence focused on the *stories* of former administrators and their personal guidelines on how to be a leader based on their *experience*. The decade of the 1950's marked the beginning of the theory movement in educational leadership because the field was establishing its place and legitimacy in scholarship. At that time, it was widely considered that educational leadership students required an understanding of theory to guide decision-making [7]. In other words, scientific principles were held in higher regard than personal beliefs and experience. Organizational theory was also a strong force during that time and conceptual models of educational leadership were introduced [6]. One example of the theory from this era would be the view of organizations as closed or open systems. Schools were initially seen as closed systems or units onto themselves; later, however, schools were viewed as complex, open systems interacting with, and acting on society and being influenced by society [7].

Toward the end of the 1980s, contrasting theoretical perspectives began to emerge in educational leadership such as critical race theory, and feminism. Educational leadership increasingly began to recognize that leadership operated within, and was influenced by, larger social systems. In the views of some [6], this left the educational leadership as a field of study in epistemological disarray, with gaps between its theoretical underpinnings and lacking hard evidence from scholarly, empirical research [6]. Within this complexity of differing views, educational leadership also began to be appreciated for its complexity. Scholars faced some difficulty coming to a general leadership theory that would fit most situations and, instead, a diverse field of discourses about leadership emerged [6].

Some argued that the role of leadership was to promote social justice [8], while others saw leadership as a moral endeavor or a calling [9]. Others saw that leadership involved learning within a community of learners [10]. Still others found that educational leadership theory closely aligned with chaos and complexity theory as the new science [11]. A large body of work theorized the educational leader as an instructional leader who focused on the improvement of student learning [12]. In addition, educational leadership theorists who saw the world through alternative lenses challenged the dominant paradigms of educational leadership through a feminist lens [13], through post-positivist thinking [14], and inclusive leadership [15], for example. Some theorists more than others focus on the organizational leadership and management aspects of the role [18].

While there is disagreement about the focus of educational leadership theory, the research points in the direction that successful leaders do share some common traits: they are open-minded and ready to learn; they are flexible within their schema of core values; and they are

persistent, resilient, and optimistic in the face of daunting circumstances [2]. This supports the perception that you can learn leadership through the acquisition of leadership skills, knowledge of leadership in context, and through the development of an attitude or characteristics associated with successful leaders.

Case studies have also been used in educational leadership studies as a research design. For example, Gold [16] employs case studies in her research design. Her team visited ten school sites and then created a cross-site analysis of key messages about leadership from this research. Her findings, similar to earlier studies [2] are: a) that leaders demonstrate strong communication skills; b) leaders model and value distributed leadership; and c) leaders build capacity [16]. As the course instructors, we would like to have students similarly analyze across cases to determine strong and consistent themes indicating key values and skills of educational leaders.

This limited review of the research suggests that students of educational leadership may benefit from multiple opportunities to examine leadership theory as well as understand leadership practice within the context of Canadian society. The question then arises, "What is the optimal way for students to learn about a field of study which has been theorized and counter-theorized, and when the context for practice in the field is continuously changing and precariously complex?"

As the authors examined similarly complex fields of theory and practice, the case study design emerged as a learning tool that has been successfully explored in similarly complex fields of study. The case study provides opportunities for students to be creative and expansive in their thinking, and encourages students to think broadly in cross-disciplinary ways while considering relevant theoretical constructs.

## 3.0 CASE STUDIES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

We, the authors, teach courses on educational leadership within a graduate school program in education and digital technology. The courses are online and we describe them as polysynchronous [17]. The in-class discussions are fully synchronous using the Adobe Connect platform for live audio/video feed and the provision for students to work synchronously in small groups using video, audio share and text capture. Other synchronous elements of the course include a "chat" or backchannel for students to share additional ideas and ask questions without interrupting the flow of discussion in class. We employ these digital tools as affordances to allow the students to simulate the types of work and learning they (will) experience outside of the academy. We want them to learn from each other and realize that there is strength in collective knowledge while making use of all of the affordances of Web 2.0. Senge [18] defines a learning organization as one that develops its collective capacity to continually increase its collective capacity to learn. He also supports a structure for learning while engaged in the work setting stating,

Learning is not just about some brilliant new insight or breakthrough experience. How do you learn, say,

team-based product development? The same way you learn to write or to play the piano or to perfect your golf stroke: you practice. You never reach the end. No matter how much you write, play piano, or golf, you're aware how much better you can get. You have to exploit opportunities in people's daily experience to continually enhance their capacities -- which is really all that learning means. To do that, you need a learning infrastructure -- the time and resources to support reflection, practice, and dissemination of ideas and experience. [18], p. 17

A key consideration with respect to the use of case studies in educational leadership studies is, "How best can students approach a field of knowledge (such as educational leadership) in which the research is still under construction, and the field struggles with its own definitions and complexity?" We sought a learning paradigm that closely resembles the *communities of practice* [19] and *collective capacity-building* that mirrors research and practice in educational administration. Communities of practice are cross-functional teams which are characterized by knowledge sharing, learning, and working together to make change [20]. To that end, we explore *case studies* as one way to help adult learners construct knowledge and skills in this field.

Callaos [21] finds that case studies are a rich form of learning because they encourage both logical thinking and analogical thinking (such as reflection, creativity and innovation). Case studies have the potential to integrate different aspects of leadership such as law, responsibilities, and ethics. In working through a case study and integrating these key aspects, an adult learner has an opportunity to build higher order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Properly structured case studies can give students the opportunity to look back and reflect on their decisions, their decision-making process, and how others make decisions. In this way, a case study can be strongly integrative because it integrates research, education and real-life problem solving [21].

We suggest that case studies in educational administration courses can help graduate students integrate theory and practice and reflection. The learning paradigm for a case study is constructivist [21]. Case studies, like stories, might help students understand the past but help them to build on the story for the benefit of their own learning. When new learning is compared with past experience, students share their previous experiences, collaborate with others, and build new understandings.

The skill of collaboration is rooted in educational leadership literature on professional learning communities [10] which is based on Wenger's [19] theoretical model of *communities of practice*. This model is interdisciplinary in its scope. Working together in a learning community means that, by its very nature, everyone in the community is learning and building the collective capacity of both the individuals and the group to solve problems. The group relies on the sharing of collective experience with patterns of interaction that are productive.

Johnson [22], identifies the five main tenets of cooperative learning in the tertiary educational experience as follows:

[T]o be cooperative, a group must have clear positive interdependence, members must promote each other's learning and success face-to-face, hold each other personally and individually accountable to do his or her fair share of the work, use appropriately the interpersonal and small-group skills needed for cooperative efforts to be successful, and process as a group how effectively members are working together. [22], p. 6

In order to understand the case study process further, we review present literature on case studies and then apply this understanding to design the case studies that we intend to use in our leadership courses. We should state at the outset that this is a not an exhaustive review of the literature, as we were seeking examples of two elements: 1) how case studies have been used for the study of educational leadership; and 2) how case studies have been applied for teaching and learning in various disciplines. These findings are presented next.

#### 4.0 CASE STUDIES AS LEARNING

Case studies provide one learning method that allows students to apply leadership theory to practice [23], [24] and also encourages reflective practice [24]. Case studies enable students to develop the skills of short and longer term decision-making, and help students appreciate the perspectives of multiple stakeholders involved in the case study [23]. It would be an ideal situation if case studies had already been identified that had been proven to support learning in educational leadership, but a shortage of such cases has already been identified [24]. Additionally, no instances were located in the literature which discuss the use of case studies for learning about educational leadership in online, synchronous courses. For these reasons, we are proposing that the students in our leadership courses develop the case studies with support from their professors.

Zuelke and Willerman [24] theorize that leadership students need the opportunity to write and revise their own case studies in order to develop the case study in an optimal way for it to be used to build the skills of other leadership learners. Students should be encouraged to share similar stories which will build understandings of different perspectives on similar issues. When students develop their own leadership case studies, they will likely require support to identify the problem and to frame the case study in ways that allow problem solving for short and long-term solutions.

The short-term solution needs to be stated in behavioural terms relative to the identified problem. At the next stage, when students address the longer-term solutions to the problem, they begin to address the broader policy and societal issues that are relevant to a case. It is important for students to consider which values and theory have influenced them in approaching the problem, and it helps for the instructor to continuously frame case studies within the theory of reflective practice [25]. It is also helpful to have discussion questions for cases to help students benefit optimally from a case study [24].

Angel [23] provides a template for the discussion of case studies, suggesting that the first steps are to review the case and identify the stakeholders or actors and the primary and secondary problems, including evidence for

each of the problems. Next, she suggests that students work on a list of specific solutions, beginning with short-term solutions, but also considering which long-term solutions needed to have been in place so that the problem did not occur in the first place. The final steps are the reflection or evaluation of the proposed solutions followed by an action plan [23]. Zuelke and Zimmerman [24] suggest that these steps can be abbreviated to four actions:

- 1) identify the problem;
- 2) state a short term solution;
- 3) state a long-term solution; and
- 4) outline the theories, laws or policies which helped to inform the decision.

They also suggest that students review their decisions based on identifying what influenced them toward certain solutions (reflection) and encouraging students to write discussion questions for their cases [24]. When writing about case studies in the health field, Gottschlich finds that case studies are generally organized into three sections: the introduction, description of the case, and discussion [26].

Gill [27] stipulates that there are multiple forms of case study. An *example case*, for instance, is a short anecdote or war story that proves a point, or demonstrates cause and effect more efficiently than a theoretical model. A *research case study* typically describes a complex situation or a group of cases that are linked conceptually. An *illustrative case study* provides an example of a situation of interest. A *case study exercise* is a problem-solving exercise that can be looked at through different lenses.

None of these case studies carry the same potential for connecting theory, practise and reflection as the *discussion case study*. According to Gill, the objective is to create a case study which will be used for class discussion. Discussion case studies present situations where the discussants need to develop solutions and evaluate the solutions. The goal is not to create a list of possible solutions, but to make a decision and outline the reasons that support the decision [27]. It was the consideration of Gill's definition of the *discussion case study* [27] which prompted the title for this paper.

## 5.0 WRITING THE CASE STUDY IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

As is the case with all written communication, we anticipate that different case studies written by groups of student authors will have different compelling elements. It is the intent of the authors to have students write the case studies and the discussion questions, and then present their case studies to the other students in the course for discussion and feedback. As the instructors, we anticipate that the students will enjoy the engagement that accompanies authoring the design of a well-written case study. Finally, each group of student authors of case studies will be asked to provide a digital version of their case study, either through a video or other type of simulation, in addition to the written text. Based on a review of the literature, there is some agreement on the elements that should be included in a case study. For example, it is recommended that case study authors use short, descriptive sentences and do not include

tangential details that are not pertinent to the main idea [26], [28].

Gill and Mullarkey [28] stipulate that the difference between a case and a case study needs to be made clear. A *case study* is an analysis of a situation or a *case* which is a real life situation or as close to real life as possible without breaching confidentiality. A *case study* requires an introduction which includes a description of *the case* which should explain why this particular case study is compelling, important, or significant. Students will be encouraged to incorporate references into the introduction so that their scenario can be grounded in the literature or situated within gaps in the literature. One recommendation is that the case study should have a one-page overview which introduces the case and draws the reader in [27]. The one-page case overview should do the following: 1) Introduce the key decision-maker or the protagonist in the case study by providing a name, this individual's role in the organization and a brief reference to the decision that needs to be made. 2) Next the overview of the case should provide some context, describing the educational institution, country or region, and when technology is involved, an overview of the technologies will be included in the context. 3) The overview page should also include the decision that needs to be made as well as 4) the alternatives to the decision [28].

The context of the case is presented in the second section where the case is described. This section needs to cover the required information about the context working in general from the broader context to the more specific elements of context. This will challenge students to consider how to explain a context so that others can situate themselves within the context for discussion. If technology is significant, the context description will include this within the context of the country or the region, the description of the particular school, college, or university setting, and the policy environment, for either the district school board or the sector of education (college or university).

The people in the organizational unit within which the decision is to be made are presented in the third section, outlining the levels of responsibility and/or the stakeholder elements. This section should identify everyone who is involved in the case. If a chart is provided, a written explanation of the roles should also be provided. Again, this section should be fairly descriptive of all persons involved.

The fourth section of the case study should identify the decision that needs to be made, identifying the nature of the decision, its importance, and the potential repercussions of the decision. Alternative decisions should also be presented and explored fully, reflecting on each potential decision and its implications and potential impact. Within this section, students may call on relative theory that helps with the consideration of this case.

The closing section of the case study should present the final reflections of the decision-maker on the path that was chosen, the action plan or timeline, and anticipated outcomes. More importantly the justification for the decision should be considered. Mezirow reminds us that adults who examine their values or justifications for their actions are engaging in *critical reflection* [29].

Finally, each case study should include the discussion question and key areas for reflection. The reflection areas should be broad such as "Reflect on different

types of power and how educational leaders use power and influence.” Sources reviewed cited differing page lengths for the case study. The following overview chart was developed based on these multiple sources [23], [26], [27], [28] so the page lengths suggested should be considered as guidelines.

Executive Summary of the Situation	1 page	Provide an overview. Establish the significance. Introduce the key decision-maker (s) or write it in the 1 <sup>st</sup> person as the protagonist. Draw in or hook the reader.
Context	1-2 pages	Describe the region, the work site, and policy environment.
People/ Organization	1-2 pages	Describe the people and accountability aspects, the stakeholders, the organizational chart, and the reporting lines.
Problems and Solutions	1-2 pages	Describe the type of decision needed. Consider the alternatives. A rich case will have more than one right answer. Make a decision.
Closing	1 page	Reflect on the chosen decision and justify it. Reflect on the values on which it was predicated. Discuss the impact of the decision. Review the decision process, and the lessons learned.
Discussion/ Reflection/ Lessons learned	1 page	Identify the discussion questions for this case study. Identify the key areas or topics for critical reflection.

**Table 1: Robertson & Muirhead, 2017**

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Discussion case studies as a learning methodology may have seen more applications to date in health-related fields [30] but their potential benefits as a learning method in education and other related fields are that both the design of the case and case study discussion provide links between theory and practice [23]. In addition, case studies can help students work through decision-making processes when there are multiple perspectives to be taken into account and multiple, cross-disciplinary contexts to be considered [21], [27], [31]. When students work on case studies, they have opportunities to test theories, as well as opportunities to investigate events more deeply, and shed light on challenging decisions and why they were undertaken [29], [31]. Students have an opportunity to reflect on their own perceptions and values in critical ways [29]. Case studies, written from the basis of an authentic situation, can interest and engage students when the narrative is authentic and powerful [27].

Connelly and Clendenin [32] find that *narrative* is frequently used in research studies of the educational experience, stating:

Although narrative inquiry has a long intellectual history both in and out of education, it is increasingly used in studies of educational experience. One theory in educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. [32], p. 2

They remind us that the use of the narrative is a way to characterize the human experience and that the study of narrative is used in multiple fields of social science, so it is cross-disciplinary [32].

In this proposal for the use of case studies in educational leadership courses, the authors have constructed a structure surrounding the “war stories” that builds in elements of critical reflection around the narrative. Brookfield [33] makes a clear distinction between reflecting on practice and reflecting critically. When an educator reflects on his/her practice, s/he is encouraged to scrutinize the internalized and taken-for-granted assumptions of practice. For example, some might say that *students do not need lectures*. Yet, with reflection can come the realization that some students in some instances require a grounding in a topic, and a lecture can be both an efficient and an effective way to accomplish this. Brookfield encourages this type of critical reflection and he also focuses on examining where and how the use of power may be distorting or framing the educational interactions [33].

The authors of this paper were unable to locate studies that examine learning in education leadership through case studies that include technology, which may indicate that presently there is a gap in the field. Similarly, there were no case studies located that were presented by students or to students for discussion using polysynchronous methods or digital contexts for their educational leadership studies. This is an area for further exploration where student-developed case studies could enrich the field. For example, educational leadership students can reflect on their learning when it is provided through the means of an engaging case study discussion and compare this with their learning from other methods such as, for example, problem-based online learning [34] and other, forms of active, constructed online learning.

## 7.0 REFERENCES

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