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Using Case Studies and Online Discussions to Educate Future Health Administrators

Pamela Walsh

Eastern Michigan University, pwalsh@emich.edu

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USING CASE STUDIES AND ONLINE DISCUSSIONS TO EDUCATE FUTURE HEALTH ADMINISTRATORS

PAMELA WALSH
SCHOOL OF HEALTH SCIENCES

Pamela Walsh is a relatively new faculty member at Eastern Michigan University, teaching health administration. This chapter details the adjustments she made in one of her courses, Legal Issues in Health Care, the second time she taught it; the chapter also discusses adjustments Pam plans to make in the future. Pam's work concentrates most heavily on the implementation of case studies and threaded discussions, and the ways in which both of these pedagogical innovations worked and the ways in which they did not live up to their promise.

What Pam has done here is to provide a valuable service for people working out the kinks in a new course and trying to perfect it. She walks the reader through her thought process in exploring these teaching innovations, and also skillfully uses data to assess how well each innovation worked (from her own perspective and from the perspective of her students). It serves as a useful reminder to all of us that pedagogical innovations work best when they are frequently assessed; it also demonstrates, yet again, the potentially powerful role the student voice has in informing our teaching practices.

Introduction

I am a 'junior faculty' in the Health Administration Program, located in the School of Health Sciences at Eastern Michigan University. 'Junior' means that I am the newest faculty of the four in this program. I am not the youngest, to say the least. My foray into the academic world comes after over thirty years working in various supervisory, administrative and consulting capacities in diverse health care settings. For nine years prior to joining the academic world as a tenure track faculty, I was pursuing a doctorate in political science. During all of my first year and most of my second year at the university, I was writing my dissertation, which was very stressful. I quickly learned during my first year at Eastern that teaching is very time-consuming, particularly when the teacher is heavily motivated by a focus on student learning. Intuitively, I knew that straight lectures were not the most effective method of helping students to learn, so I tried different methods to engage students in the learning process, time-consuming as they were.

One method included the use of case studies to help students understand legal issues facing health care administrators. Thus, when I applied to participate in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning seminar at Eastern Michigan during my second year, I decided to apply the principles of teaching and learning to the Legal Issues in Health Care class that I teach in the winter semester. I intended to continue with the case study approach, because anecdotal comments from students in the winter 2006 class indicated that they found case studies to be useful. The difference is that I would gather evidence and evaluate the case study as a pedagogical teaching tool in several contexts.

This paper discusses what transpired during the winter 2007 semester in this class. I will describe the focus of the investigation, the data collection methods, and preliminary results of the study, paying particular attention to how it affected my teaching (and my learning) and how it affected students' perceptions of their own learning.

Focus of Investigation

Legal Issues in Health Care is a 400-level class, designed primarily for students enrolled in the Health Administration major. It is also open to students who are not majoring in Health Administration; there are no prerequisites. This class met Monday evenings from 5:30 P.M. to 8:20 P.M. The first time I taught this class was in the winter 2006 semester with ten students enrolled. The small size lent itself well to group discussions. In the winter 2007 semester, however, 27 students enrolled in the class. I am unsure as to the reason for this wide variation in the number of students. It may parallel the growth in the number of students declaring health administration as their major, and/or it may reflect a convenient class time and the lack of prerequisites.

This class explores various laws, administrative rulings and judicial opinions that health administration students need to understand as they prepare for their professional careers. The objectives of the course are for the students to:

- Identify key legal principles of administering hospitals and health care agencies.
- Investigate, read and interpret state and federal constitutional and statutory provisions of the law as well as court decisions that impact hospitals and health care agencies.
- Identify legal consequences of administrative decisions using analytical skills.

The purpose of this study is to (1) assess students' knowledge regarding legal issues that health care administrators face in their daily activities; and (2) determine if there is a relationship between knowledge acquisition and the teaching method. I used a variety of pedagogical methods, including lecture, case studies and threaded discussions. Threaded discussions are a form of an online 'chat room' in which students respond to questions posed by the instructor and to each others' comments at different times; they need not be present to 'chat'. Assessment mechanisms used in the course included online quizzes, three tests and a term paper.

The major focus of this paper is on the case studies and threaded discussions. Case study assignments included individual written case study analyses, in-class group discussions and online threaded discussion. I assigned grades to the three individual case study analyses (the grading procedure is explained below) and the threaded discussion. I graded the threaded discussion as a participation grade. If students participated in the threaded discussion, they received the points; if not, they did not receive points. No grades were assigned to the in-class discussions of the cases.

I obtained a baseline of students' overall knowledge of the legal aspects of health care administration by administering a pre-test that was available from the publisher's instructor's manual. At the end of the semester, I administered the same test to compare the results. During the semester, I had the students take ten online quizzes on the assigned chapters before class. The purpose was to have students read the assignments prior to class in order to have fruitful discussions with all students, rather than just with a few. I reviewed the responses and then discussed in class those items that they had difficulty in understanding. I administered three tests, two of which were in class and one that was online. The tests were a combination of multiple choice and short answer questions. I provided in-depth study guides for the two in-class tests and no study guide for the online one because that was an "open book" test.

In order to stimulate participation in the threaded discussion, I initially divided the class into seven groups of four students, on a random basis, and assigned the same case study to all the groups. Since a grade was to be given, I anticipated students would be active participants in the threaded discussion. This did not occur within the majority of the groups. Approximately half of the students participated; in some groups, only one participated. Several students expressed their frustrations in e-mails, indicating that it was difficult to discuss the cases only with themselves. After airing my frustration with my SOTL group, I took my colleagues' advice and re-configured the number and composition of the groups into four groups with seven students each. This was after their first test and after their first individual case study, so I was able to group students based on their grades to date to obtain

heterogeneous groups. I presumed that by having diverse groups, there would be both initiators and followers in the groups and would lead to greater participation in discussions in each group. This did increase the participation in the discussions.

For the individual case study analyses and one threaded discussion, I used case studies that were available from the publisher of the textbook used in class, Pozgar's (2004) *Legal Aspects of Health Care Administration*, and one case study from the Internet. The individual case studies were summaries of judicial opinions. For the threaded discussions, I assigned one judicial opinion to be analyzed using the same format as for the individual cases, one elder abuse situation to be analyzed by answering questions posted with the situation and the last was the identification of legal terms. I assigned individual case study analyses and threaded discussions to compare the depth of the analyses. To assist students in conducting the analyses, I distributed an outline as to what was to be included in their analyses (e.g., case citation, author of the case, facts of the case, main legal issue, court's decision and implication for health care administrators). On the web site I posted an essay written by a professor at George Washington Law School aimed at teaching new law students how to read a judicial opinion (Kerr 2005). The textbook references numerous judicial opinions to illustrate the topical points.

Background Literature Regarding Use of Case Studies

Case studies as a teaching method have been used for over 100 years at the Harvard Business School (Delpier 2006) and are used in the disciplines of law, education, medicine and nursing; they are used to actively involve students in the learning process (Davis and Wilcox, n.d.; Tomey 2003). One study discusses the integration of case studies as a teaching strategy at Eastern Michigan University in the early nineties (DeZure 1993). Case studies are also used in the health administration curriculum, although there is a dearth of literature regarding their effectiveness in this context. Much of the literature regarding the use of case studies in administration stems from the business management literature (Barnes, Christensen and Hansen 1994; Theroux

and Kilbane 2004). Law schools use case studies to analyze judicial opinions and rulings and their application to various situations; they have proven an effective tool for helping students engage in the course material (Kerr 2005).

Results

I collected a significant amount of data that is not yet completely analyzed; this report represents a first cut at data analysis. Combined, the three individual case studies were worth 10% of the grade. For the first case study, the mean grade was 76.2% (n=26), for the second case study, the mean grade was 74.5% (n=26), and for the third, the mean grade was 97.5% (n=24). To assess the case study analyses, I assigned points along with the outline. There were 12 items to be addressed with varying points; e.g., caption and case citations were worth two points each, while the items addressing the facts of the case, legal issues, the court's decision, and implications for health care administrators were worth ten points each. The first two case studies were those obtained from the supplemental cases provided by the publisher of the text and the third was from a Supreme Court opinion obtained from an Internet site.

The students indicated that the second case study was very difficult; however, the mean grade was comparable to the first. They indicated they did not like doing the last case study because it was "too long and convoluted" even though it was easy to read. I believe that the fact that it was easy to read contributed to the higher grades on it because the students could more readily address all the required points in the assignment. By this time, they were also familiar with my expectations; moreover, I was more liberal in overlooking grammatical errors than in previous case studies.

More important than students' grades, I was interested in their perceptions of which of the various teaching methods contributed to their learning. On the last day of class, I distributed a survey that asked for their opinions regarding the various activities that were required of them during the semester and whether or not they contributed to their learning. There were eight items that required a response on a

Likert scale format, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Examples were: “The individual case studies contributed to my learning” and “The case study discussed through threaded discussion contributed to my learning.” I asked them to indicate their reasons if they scored an answer of 3 or below (3 was neutral). Also, I asked several open-ended questions. These were “What did you perceive as the strengths of the class?”, “What do you believe needs to be improved?”, “What did I as an instructor do well?”, and “What recommendations do you have for others who will be taking this class?” I asked them to indicate if Health Administration was their major or minor. There were no other identifying factors; I did not ask for gender because there were only three males in the class.

I have analyzed the results for the class as a group and then by the students’ major and minor. Two-thirds of the class agreed that the case studies discussed in class contributed to their learning and 48.1% agreed that the individual case study assignments contributed to their learning. Of the remainder, 33.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the individual case studies contributed to their learning; 18.1% were neutral. Several comments explaining their disagreement were “they were hard to understand and took away from reading the book”, “I didn’t understand them in the beginning of the semester and was unable to improve them”, “I really didn’t understand the language”, “The questions seemed repetitive”, “They were often hard to interpret”, “No one really knew how to do them”, “They were complex”, and “They were usually harder than the ones we went over in class.” One student wrote, “I didn’t learn anything while I did them. But now that I go back and read them, I do.” An underlying theme emerges regarding students’ comments on the case studies – their complexity made it difficult for students to understand them and use them to maximum benefit.

Twenty-one of the students indicated they were health administration majors, five were not and one did not provide an answer. Of the 21 health administration majors, 57.1% (12) agreed that individual case studies contributed to their learning and 20% (1) of the non-health administration majors agreed that the individual case studies were useful. The small numbers somewhat limit the conclusions that

can be drawn, but speculation is certainly possible. The health administration majors may have been able to better identify the relationship to health than the non-health administration majors. The case studies addressed topics related to health administration; students were asked to state their opinions regarding the implications of the particular case for health administrators. In future classes, the causes and consequences of differences in opinion between the health administration and non-administration majors regarding the usefulness of case studies will be something I explore in greater detail.

There were three assignments using the threaded discussion format, each of which was graded only on a pass/fail basis (participated/did not participate). The first was a case study analysis of a state court's judicial ruling using a similar format to the individual case studies; the second was a response to a situation and the third was identification of legal terms. Only 37% (10) of the students agreed that analyzing a case study through threaded discussion was useful, i.e., that it contributed to their learning. Almost thirty percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that analyzing case studies through threaded discussion contributed to their learning. None of the health administration majors strongly disagreed; however, 28.6% disagreed. Comments regarding the case study analysis through threaded discussion were similar to those for the individual case studies: "too hard to understand" and "complex." Several indicated that once one student provided a response to the questions, the analysis was done. Another indicated that the online case studies did not require much effort, so he/she didn't learn much. One student wrote case studies were easier "to do" in person; "other people had already written what I thought anyway."

The situation was quite the opposite for the situational case study. Students overwhelmingly (81.5%) indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that it contributed toward their learning. According to some students, the situational case study was "easy to read and to apply," in contrast to the perceived complexity of the other case studies.

Almost all (92.6%) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the online quizzes contributed to their learning. The underlying theme: "it forced me to read the book!" Writing the term paper also

contributed to their learning, according to the 85.2% who agreed or strongly agreed; 85.7% of the health administration majors and 80% of non-health administration majors indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that the term paper was useful.

Lessons Learned

In winter 2006, the first time I taught the Legal Issues in Health Care class, I religiously adhered to the outline provided by the publisher and I believed I had to 'cover' everything in the textbook. Also, I noticed that students were not reading the assignments ahead of time; they would be underling what I emphasized rather than participating in the discussion. The latter was the reason I incorporated the online quizzes during the winter 2007 term. I wanted the students to read the material, so we could pay attention to case studies and their applicability to health administration in our discussions. This freed me from thinking I had to cover everything in the book. I was able to stress what I thought was important for health administration students to understand. The book was a resource. Based on the successes of the online quizzes, I plan to continue using them in this class and incorporating them into other classes.

I learned that identifying case studies and using relevant ones is difficult and very time consuming. The textbook did include a number of cases and references to cases; however, I believed they were inadequate. I selected case studies provided with the instructor's manual. This was time consuming because very few of the cases studies were easy to understand. I found relevant case studies in other textbooks. I did not use them because of my concern with copyright issues. Even though many of the students indicated they thought the book was useful, I plan to switch to a textbook that includes diverse cases in the appendix that apply to each topic discussed in the text. These cases are not as convoluted as the other ones, nor would there be copyright infringement issues. In addition, having the case studies in the text will provide a better opportunity to focus more on the group case study written assignments rather than individual assignments. This will enhance student learning and will reduce the number of assignments I

must grade. This will allow for more immediate feedback.

The majority of the students did not believe that the individual case study analyses were helpful. I plan to revise those assignments so that students can find them more useful in their learning process. Case studies help to 'paint a picture' to relate concepts to application. However, the picture needs to be clear and in focus rather than fuzzy and unclear. One area that is germane to this area is the need for students to understand the legal terminology. I posted online the article regarding how to read a legal opinion. I did not go over it in detail and only discussed certain legal terms referenced in the case studies that I thought needed to be clarified. I presumed, incorrectly, that the students had the resources at their fingertips (essay, glossary of terms in the back of the book and the faculty) and would use them. One student commented that the essay was very helpful; it was excellent when she finally read it at the end of the term! In future classes, I will use this article to address this issue at the beginning of the semester and not wait until the end of the term.

After reading through 24 drafts of the term papers and 27 final term papers, I was ready to shelve the term paper assignment and replace it with a less intense writing assignment. Upon reviewing the students' opinions, I will keep the term paper assignment. However, the threaded discussions did not appear to be useful in the learning process regarding the case study analysis. Students did respond to the situational discussion, which was approximately three paragraphs in length versus four pages. This is an area that needs further exploration and refinement in future iterations of the course.

Reflection

I learned a considerable amount in teaching this class by using the different formats. The primary lesson is that I cannot presume that my perception of clarity and student's perception of clarity are the same, particularly regarding assignments. Just because the assignment is listed in the syllabus or online does not mean it will be read and/or understood by all students. In the future, in this class and in others, I will develop a mechanism to clarify assignments so that we all have

the same understanding of the assignment. Also, there is a need for students to understand how all the concepts relate to each other, from course to course and within courses; that is, the linkages and their relevance to their roles as health care administrators. This is something I will definitely address more actively in future classes.

I was pleased to discover that the online quizzes were helpful. I also learned that I needed to reinforce concepts in class that I thought important, even when questions regarding these concepts were included in the quizzes. Thus, I believe that there is still a need to include lecture along with active student learning (e.g., discussions, individual case study analysis and group activities). Having students analyze case studies individually provides them the basis to be able to engage in group discussions regarding the merits of the cases and their theoretical and practical applications (Boehrer 1995). Case studies engage the students and actively involve them in the learning process (Delpier 2006; Patterson, Fleet and Duffie 1994; Tomey 2003). Students are the players and the instructor is the coach. Like so many others working on excelling in teaching challenging classes, I need to find the balance.

Summary

The SOTL seminar was a very good learning experience for me. I appreciate the feedback and encouragement I received from colleagues. Also, I was excited to study how I was teaching and what students learned. I learned that using the case study format in teaching a health law course is a very valuable tool. There is a caveat; however; the cases need to be clear and understandable and brief (not necessarily as in number of pages but rather in terms of excess frustration for the students).

In this paper, I briefly described the purpose of this study, which was to assess how the different pedagogical and assessment methods affected student perceptions of their learning regarding legal issues health care administrators face in their daily activities. I summarized the various pedagogical methods – particularly the case studies and threaded discussions – and also examined the assessment

mechanisms I used to evaluate student work – online quizzes, the three exams and the term paper. The online quizzes and the tests focused on the factual knowledge that students need to have in order to be able to analyze case studies. The tests did have some short answer questions that were application-based; however, the emphasis was on theory and facts. The term paper and the case studies involved higher order thinking.

There is much I have learned about how students perceive the usefulness of these methods, that is, whether or not they contributed to their learning. There are many lessons I derived from this study, which will dramatically affect how I approach this course in the future.

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