

Case Study and Professional Development in the Education of students at the Child Welfare Program

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Abstract

This article analyses and discusses the use of the case study in relation to constructivist learning theory in a child welfare educational context. From a teacher's point of view there are two central questions: How do students develop as professionals when they study cases? And secondly, how do students experience their learning when studying cases? Forty-five part-time students in the child welfare program at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences in Norway were asked to reflect on their learning experiences with case studies. In analyzing their responses, it was found that their work experiences played a significant role in their work with case studies. A second finding was that there was an absence or extremely weak reflexivity among some of the students when dealing with the case and relating it to their own work experiences.

Case study and professional development in a constructivist learning theoretical frame of reference

The use of case studies for professional development employing constructivist teaching principles is based on two main premises (Delay 2001, Eraut 2004, Tuomi-Gröhn, T. & Engström, Y. 2003). Firstly, learning is understood as being located in students and their perceptions of 'the world' and their development as professionals is viewed as involving processes of making meaning in conversation with diverse informational sources in their educational and professional field environments. This process has two main features. On the one hand, it becomes active when new information and knowledge is linked to previous experiences and understandings (Delay 2001). This increases the student's understanding and ability to interpret a case description in a new or more nuanced way. On the other hand, learning also occurs when the student uses previously acquired knowledge, skills and competence in a new context. Eraut (2004) refers to this process as transfer and in relation to case studies, transfer occurs when the student uses his personal experience and understanding to identify what is involved with a new case.

The second basic is one emphasizing the environmental dimension. This too has a two-fold character represented by different dimensions. One dimension is expressed by the physical environment where the case study and the professional development

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are situated. In constructivist theory this physical setting is often referred to as the situated aspect of learning (Delay 2001, Eraut 2004, Tuomi-Gröhn, T. & Engström, Y. 2003). The other dimension is that of cultural meaning and it is often referred to as the contextual aspect of learning. Both case studies as well as professional development are heavily influenced by cultural meaning. At the same time they are situated in the physical environment where learning takes place. The distinction between situated and contextual is of an analytical kind. In reality, context and situation are simultaneously present. In an educational setting the case itself often represents a description of a professional issue differing from academic theory. For Eraut, this represents a variation of codified knowledge. When the construction or interpretation of a case is based on personal understanding, this also represents a kind of personal knowledge. When seen against this background, professional development in a constructivist learning perspective appears as a lifelong process.

Case study and developing reflective competence at the Child Welfare education

In the child welfare program briefly described in the following pages, case studies are found in a diversity of forms and various contexts. In field placement especially, case studies are understood as having a significant role in furthering the development of future child welfare professionals. Case studies are the focus of classroom work as well and they often are used as points of departure for homework assignments to students. Some cases are constructed by the students individually or in a group, while cases often are provided by the teacher. Sometimes cases can be constructed as ideal types to be used for describing key issues in the profession (Hellesnes 1988, Mollenhauer 1996). And sometimes, too, the students' own experiences and ideas involving cases can also be used as points of departure in teaching. In this respect, it is important to acknowledge that a case never is able to fully capture the complexity and intricateness of a real situation. Using case studies in an educational context is understood as helping develop a level of professional reflective competence. With Kennedy we may say that using case studies intends to *"...prepare students to think on their feet, developing both reasoning skills and strategies for analyzing and interpreting new situations in a 'sufficiently' flexible way and adaptable to accommodate the variety of situations they are likely to encounter"* (Kennedy 1990, p.813).

In a constructivist learning theoretical perspective a main aim in using case studies is to train students in skills for identifying key issues raised in the case and then to discuss and justify alternative answers rather than find the one and only answer. Studying cases can also help the student to approach academic knowledge from another angle and help them recognize its often abstracted pattern of explanation. Codified knowledge described in the case also helps students recognize professional key issues in a way not easily provided for them by abstract theory.

A case study task at the Child Welfare program

In the autumn of 2009, 45 students enrolled in the child welfare program at Oslo University College were given a task to reflect upon their learning in relation to a case study assigned to them by their teachers. All students were enrolled in the part-time program of the Child Welfare program i.e. they are also working in one capacity or another in the child welfare field. The students could choose, if they so desired, ideal cases involving “children with particular needs”. They could also choose to create their own cases on this topic. Each student was then asked to analyze and to discuss the case in a kindergarten or school context.

Three questions were formulated by the teacher to guide the task.

1. “How is the child’s special needs expressed in the particular case?”
2. “What can the reason(s) be for the child’s special needs?”
3. “How can the employees of the school or kindergarten help the child in this situation?”

The mode of the last two questions opened up for alternative interpretations and suggestions and encouraged the students as well to take a reflective and experimental approach. Three further instructions were given by the teacher to guide the work of the students: They were asked to relate their analysis and discussion to relevant theory. Each student then was asked to read and comment the text of another student. And finally, each student was asked to reflect on the learning process they had experienced in working with the case.

The responses of the students to this task represent the main focus of this article which is part of a larger study currently being carried out. From a research point of view, the author’s understandings as well as the voices of the students themselves expressed in the text material constitute the material analyzed. Thirty-nine of the 45 students provided commentaries on their learning processes in addition to the other areas assigned to them for the case study. The students were insured that they would be assigned numbers randomly and that their comments would be anonymous. And in the following they have been translated into English by the article’s author.

Findings

Analyses of the material yielded two main findings with regard to the students’ learning in addition to the case study task. A third and less frequent finding of interest provided some indication of problems in using the case study.

More than half of the students mentioned that the reading of the other students’ texts was useful to them. These appeared to help students see alternative interpretations and to widen their perspectives. One student reported finding it “...useful to see how a case could be analyzed in different ways”. These exchanges also helped students see how their interpretations were influenced by their own working experiences. As one student put it: “Although we used the same case we interpreted it differently. Our working experiences colored our interpretation. I, working in the kindergarten have a different understanding than (...) working in the school”.

The use of students' own experience in case studies

The majority of students emphasized the importance of using their own experiences in dealing with the case study and making use of theoretical approaches.

One student expressed it this way: *"I enjoyed being able to begin the analysis by using my experiences, it enabled me to concentrate on a theme of interest (...)"*.

Another student used the case to discuss previous work experiences and to re-evaluate actions taken earlier. The student reported: *"The formulation of the case enabled me to re-evaluate actions taken before and to engage in an inner discussion concerning my own professional work (...)"*.

It appeared too that when the case was provided by the teacher, it often became a catalyst for 'inner discussions/inner dialogues' for students involving re-evaluations of actions that they had earlier carried out in their working lives. Here the case study tended to represent a form of professional codified knowledge activating understanding of previous experiences. In a constructivist theoretical framing, this can be understood as a process of making meaning in a conversation with different types of informational sources (Deley 2001).

Several students also related their own experiences with the case to theory. One reported how the case influenced the study of theory and made it relevant to her own experiences; *"...at the same time it inspired me to read theoretical (...) literature that was relevant for my work"*. This illustrates what (Erauts 2004) describes as transfer when students use case experience which is a type of codified knowledge in their approach to codified academic knowledge or theory. Another student referred to the learning process when trying to merge theory and practice with reference to a particular institutional context. *"A great deal of learning occurred when I tried to merge theory and practice and attempted to see the way that different perspectives function in analyzing initiatives in an ordinary day at school"*. This merging of practical initiatives in the light of different theoretical perspectives illustrates the reciprocal process between students' own experiences on the one hand, and input or external information on the other. Common to all the examples above was a reflexive approach in their case study learning. Some students' texts, however, revealed weak and/or absence of reflection.

A missing reflection in the texts of students

A surprising finding in the material was that there were absent or very weak reflections in the commentaries made by several students about their learning. This was expressed in two ways. In summarizing what was done in a particular work situation, one student reported that *"... the girl currently attends school each day and has made fantastic efforts together with her outreach worker"*. The question 'how can the personnel help the child with particular needs' as given in the task, requires an altogether different kind of answer than the question 'what did we do and what did our interventions lead to'? When solving problems in a concrete work situation the student's reflection is steered by the here and now necessity of action. Focusing on practical work situations does not necessarily exclude reflection when it comes to identifying what the case was or when proposing ways of dealing with the situation. But, analyses in concrete work situations are of a different kind compared to those in an educational training context. The learning involved in work situations often differs from analyzing cases not requiring action. Describing a situation and emphasizing the

result of what is done in terms of success or failure within the context of professional justification is much different than reflecting on the learning process.

This different kind of learning, also regarding professional development, can be discussed in the light of different learning theoretical approaches. The social learning model developed by Bandura seems more suited to explain the kind of learning expressed above by the student. Imitation and the evaluation of effectiveness in terms of prescribed goals are sharply focused upon in the social learning theoretical model (Rønnestad 2008). Identifying what a case is about is a first step in any case study. Also dealing with the situation includes thinking. Though the social learning perspective does not exclude reflection, this perspective contrasts markedly from a constructivist learning theoretical approach. In an educational setting where the case is withdrawn from the here and now necessity of action, this latter perspective opens up for more time and space for reflecting over alternative interpretations.

This missing or weak reflexivity evidenced in some student commentaries was strengthened by another comment in the same student's text where she noted "*I have to admit that it is when I am at work that I do learn*". This admission on her part raises several questions. Does it indicate that the student does not learn or, does not see the meaning in case study learning removed from the actual praxis situation? Or, does it indicate that this is a problem of not understanding or misunderstanding the mode of question in the task given? Is the poor reflexivity reflected in some student commentaries a reflection of their inability to use hypothetical approaches to casework? Is there a need for further learning before being able to transfer concrete action in a workplace situation to a reflexive analytical one?

Summary and final comments

Case study is a method that can provide a valuable input to the development of professionals. In the education of child welfare students at the Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, case study has shown itself to have an important role to play. In the program, there is a continual discussion about how to facilitate students' learning and reflective competence with regard to professional issues and how these may be expressed in the field of praxis and in theory.

Research on the use of the case study can increase understanding and insight. By analyzing students' own reflections on their case study learning, this may contribute to theoretical clarification as well as improvements of educational praxis. The findings in this study may also be analyzed in light of a cognitive and social learning theoretical frame of reference. Our findings indicate that students involved in case study learning situations make use of their own experiences as a central point of departure. These experiences also appear to be central in their approach to theory. Some students focus on practical action in their work situation describing what happened or what was done in this particular situation. Though the necessity of action in the workplace does not exclude reflexivity, it does seem to contribute to a weakening of reflexivity for some students. The findings of this study could be elaborated upon by discussing them with students in the program who are in the final year of study. Further it can be of interest to follow up the study's other main finding - namely, the pedagogic benefits accruing when students read and discuss one

another's texts about the cases. As educators and researchers, we are positioned to involve additional student into the project and this article provides some illustrations of issues to be explored in future studies.

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