

TAU Project

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15 July 2015

Title of Project: Application of Case Studies in Teaching and Learning in Development Studies at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Durban

Abstract

Case studies are used for purposes of teaching and learning. The aim of this project was to assess the efficacy of case studies in the discipline of development studies in nurturing a learning culture which allows students to be critical thinkers capable of responding to situations under flux and fluidity against a backdrop of their variegated learning experiences. The study adopted the Integrative Learning Design Framework (ILDF) which entails three phases namely, Exploration, Enactment and Evaluation as a methodological frame. Based on emerging evidence, the first contribution of this project which informs practice, posits that case studies are effective if they take into account: context, historicity, theories, cultural-alignment, cultural-sensitivity, participation (active/passive), agency (individual/group) and are issue-based/problem-based, solution(s)-orientated, 'real-life-based', and embrace diversity of worldviews, multiplicity of perspectives/alternatives but singularity of decisions. The complementarity of case studies to other teaching methods was accentuated in this study. Its second contribution was methodological. Simultaneous, concurrent, real-time and synchronized data collection of quantitative and qualitative data on the same respondent using the same variables - which I called 'matching' - allowed for the capture of intuitive data rich for their 'adequacy' and 'completeness' which the combined methods provide and could be lost if either one of the two approaches was applied separately either in parallel or sequentially because the data are collected instantaneously. The benefits of synchronization implies that data can be collected in real-time, tapping on both traditions but obviating the need for extensive recall on the part of the respondent, the return to fieldwork on the part of the researcher and integrated data analysis from the perspective of the data analyst. One of the draw backs of 'matching'/synchronisation includes: an elongated questionnaire/interview-guide with concomitant respondent fatigue when the instrument is 'long'.

Introduction

Many business and law schools worldwide make use of case studies for purposes of teaching and learning. Once upon a time researchers believed that rote learning was the only way through which learners learned. However, I believe there are multiple ways, methods and tools and techniques through which students can learn. My question was: Are case studies one of those effective methods/tools to enrich the students' learning experience in Development Studies at the Masters level? Put differently and succinctly, *To what extent are case studies effective for Teaching and Learning?*

This study is important for me, my institution as well as the higher education sector because there are many problems which are affecting society and the country in general such as poverty, unemployment and inequality. As such, our teaching should inculcate critical thinking as opposed to rote learning to enable learners to be able to construct knowledge which will enable them to address the messy and disordered problems prevailing in society against a backdrop of our blotted and splotched learning histories. Ramsden (cited in Lockett 1995:134) argues that teaching is context specific, uncertain and always improvable:

Effective teaching refuses to take its effect on students for granted. It sees the relationship between teaching and learning as problematic, uncertain and relative. Good teaching is open to change: it involves constantly trying to find out what the effects of instruction are

on learning and modifying that instruction in light of the evidence collected. (Ramsden in Luckett 1995: 134).

Literature review

As in all research, the literature review entailed reading academic articles and documents pertinent to the project. Lattuca & Stark (cited in Trigwell & Prosser 2014:141) argue that course planning involves making decisions regarding “content to be taught, what factors affect the teaching/learning process, what alternative strategies exist to engage students with that content, how students learn, ways to determine whether students have learned what they are supposed to learn, and methods of improving the plan using this information’. For Hussain, Conner & Mayo (2014:65), curriculum as process is concerned with the emergence and the processes which give rise to the surfacing of both group and individual knowledge in a body of knowledge as well as the surfacing of activities in the system of curriculum. Luckett (1995) supports this approach and argues that curriculum should encourage transformation and it behoves upon us to select content which addresses the needs of the communities in which we live and operate. The researcher subscribes to this notion of ‘curriculum as praxis’ and embraces the notion of knowledge as ‘socially constructed’ (Luckett 1995). Cases, especially typical cases should assist in teaching content that is relevant and content which address societal problems. Riots and protest marches are commonplace in Municipalities while unemployment is a huge problem in the country. Learners should engage with these cases in order to provide solutions to these problems. These problems impose a cost to society if they are not resolved – the costs are economic, social, political and even psychological. The researcher’s role is to train Development practitioners capable to do so - that is the problem which prompted him to investigate this matter. This project sought to investigate how to engage students and how they learn using case studies. As such, for a change agent, teaching must be transformative with a change orientation. Forsgren et al., (cited in Fulbright, 2007), identify case studies as one of the active learning strategies which pushes students beyond rote learning as they (case studies) stimulate thinking and reflection because they are problem-based learning and apply ‘book knowledge’ to everyday life experiences. According to Fulbright (n.d), ‘A literature review reveals very little research on using case studies in fields other than health, law and business. However, case studies could certainly be written for any field’.

Methodology

In terms of methodology, the Integrative Learning Design Framework (ILDF) which entails three phases namely, Exploration, Enactment and Evaluation was used in this study. The study was undergirded by critical paradigm. It can be argued that there is need to foreground students’ experience and needs in the curriculum and perhaps calls for the invocation of the therapeutic discourse which looks inwards towards the self instead of a body of knowledge in defining the content of the curriculum. This is in line with Ensor (2004) who observes that a therapeutic discourse equates the primacy of the learner and the teacher or rather places them at par in the determination of the content of the curriculum as is found in the lifeskills and academic orientation programmes. Paradigms are important for curriculum design as Guba (1990 in McKenna, 2004) points out that a paradigm represents epistemological assumptions of a study which should be put forward for discussion.

In the **exploration phase** I did some literature reviews on the efficacy of using case studies; did a student needs analysis, analysis of the social and cultural context as well as an analytical analysis.

This involved the investigation of what the students require in terms of what makes their learning experience enriching and fulfilling. As such I relied on the insights of a community of learners, colleagues, experts and subject matter specialists, content developers, librarian and so forth.. I eventually involved 8 students, 7 peers and 10 educationists in separate FGDs. I also did a mixed group FGD with four students and four peers to clarify concerns from both quarters.

I followed these FGDs with a survey of 30 students (who were selected using simple random sampling) on the same matters but synchronizing open ended and close ended questions. This heralded a new mixed method approach – which is pragmatistic (abductionist) in terms of approach to analysis. I used Nvivo and SPSS software respectively for data analysis. In mixed methods, as is in this case, the FGDs and survey complement each other. FGDs formed the basis of the other.

During the **Enactment stage**, we then applied the case studies which we developed in-house which took into account context, student experiences and their aspirations. During the **Evaluation stage**, I evaluated the results. All the necessary research protocols such as permissions from the gatekeepers (University Registrar) and ethical clearances (Research Office), informed consent, voluntary participation, privacy, confidentiality from the participants were observed.

Findings

Case studies are effective if they take into account: context – the space at which experiences are enacted, historicity – history of a people should count; theories – theories which the teacher wants students to know should undergird case studies such as Habermas’ ontological theories; Foucault on governmentality; Gramsci on cultural hegemony, Karl Polanyi on ‘double movement’ etc; cultural-alignment/cultural-sensitivity, participation (facilitators must ensure that students actively engage with cases individually or in groups), agency (individual/group) and are issue-based/problem-based, solution(s)-orientated, ‘real-life-based’, and embrace diversity of worldviews, multiplicity of perspectives/alternatives but singularity of decisions. The complementarity of case studies to other teaching methods was accentuated in this study. The excerpt below encapsulates a student’s aspirations:

I do not believe in success but believe in excellence. Education of character is more important than the education of the mind. My aspirations are to instill values which consolidate community-based structures for black advancement and emancipation to bring out the excellence in African people. (23 year old student, Umlazi)

Through case studies, I was able to change my content to pulsate with such experiences. As such, this project advocates the use of case studies in many other fields of study, besides in law, health and business where it is common practice, for teaching content that is relevant and addresses societal problems.

Discussion

Case studies are useful if done in a discursive way because they allow participation, discussion, dialogue and conversation among diverse and variegated groups of participants. This diversity allows for the sprouting of innovative ideas, alternatives and differed and differentiated worldviews and hence solutions which maybe boundary expanding. Case studies present opportunities to analyse, interrogate, question and even disrupt pre-conceived notions through a dialogic peer conversation, enrich and allow for the sharing of individual and group experiences

through brainstorming. This is in line with Forsgren et al., (cited in Fulbright, 2007), who argues that case studies invoke reflection on everyday life experiences. They allow for ‘experiencing’ reality and its complexity by bringing situations to life. Participants can also role play the individuals involved in the case studies and simulate scenarios. Cases can be analysed individually or in groups. Using cases affords the participants opportunities to articulate and share their own view points and worldviews with others; make decisions based on facts; solve problems and use analytical tools (qualitative and quantitative) where necessary; as they apply their knowledge to real life situations. Under such circumstances, cases allow them to express self and themselves for themselves.

The use and interplay of both pre-developed cases studies and those that are developed in-house is important because both have their merits and de-merits. The benefits explained above, apply in many ways, to both pre-developed and self-developed case studies. However, pre-developed cases could be context-specific to defy generalisation and local application while self-developed cases may carry the biases of the developers. Furthermore, they may require exceptional skills to develop to be both simple and complex; and orderly and chaotic to bring out the best learning experience. It is anticipated that after the group discussions, candidates can be randomly selected to present the answers/solutions using case studies.

Contribution to knowledge

The key contribution to knowledge which this project (which is still on-going) are: It **informs practice** in that case studies should address complex socio-economic problems in order to find solutions - **problem solving – (application)**. They can enable the **integration** of teaching – (**integrative**) – from Poverty and Inequality to Climate Change and the Environment. They can lead to **multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary production of knowledge** as our students are social workers, civil servants, activists and so forth. Case studies can **articulate** and respond to societal problems – (**articulation and responsiveness**) and can be used to advance the agenda of transformation and social accountability – (**transformative**). They complement other methods of teaching (**complementarity**) and a **tool** for enhancing – teaching, research and community engagement.

Methodological contribution - Simultaneous, concurrent, real-time and synchronized data collection of quantitative and qualitative data on the same respondent using the same variables - which we called ‘matching’ - allowed for the capture of intuitive data rich for their ‘adequacy’ and ‘completeness’ which the combined methods provide and could be lost if either one of the two approaches was applied separately either in parallel or sequentially because the data are collected instantaneously. This entailed converting all open-ended questions into close ended questions and also using the Likert scale where applicable. The benefits of synchronization implies that data can be collected in real-time, tapping on both traditions but obviating the need for extensive recall on the part of the respondent, the return to fieldwork on the part of the researcher and integrated data analysis from the perspective of the data analyst. One of the draw backs of ‘matching’/synchronisation includes: an elongated questionnaire/interview-guide with concomitant respondent fatigue when the instrument is ‘long’.

Conclusion

This project looked at case studies and managed to establish their efficacy for teaching and learning in Development Studies at the Masters level. Using the ILDF which involved exploration, enactment and evaluation, the study revealed some important properties in case studies such as **problem solving – applied; integrative**, permit **multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary** knowledge production; **responsiveness** to societal problem, **transformative** and **complementarity** to other teaching methods. **Synchronisation/matching** emerged as the key methodological contribution. It is apt to end with insightful words by Stake (2005: 455) who argues that because cases are an applied method, they allow:

the reader to add and subtract, invent and shape – reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it more likely to be personally useful.

References

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