

Case Writing as Evidence of Good Practice in the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 2

By Professor Ron Toomey, June 2007

Teacher Case Writing

Teacher case writing is a technique designed to enable teachers to describe their practice, discuss it with colleagues and collaboratively attempt to improve it. Such case writing ultimately provides accounts of good practice or things that need to be addressed on the way towards good practice. All schools in the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 2 are expected to undertake at least four pieces of case writing as part of their involvement in the project.

Why Bother?

You have been asked to undertake case writing because:

1. It is a structure for professional learning for all those involved in the project
2. What you write about will normally provide evidence about the success or otherwise of aspects of your project which Curriculum Corporation can draw upon in writing the final report.
3. You can use your case writing pieces to communicate with colleagues about what you are 'on about', engage them and perhaps draw them into the enterprise.

What is a Case?

Cases are richly detailed narratives of teaching that are used to (a) guide personal reflection on our teaching of/about values (b) inform others about issues we are encountering in values education and how they might be approached and (c) structure professional learning within and across clusters in the VEGPSP. Although they are 'story-like', cases are not simply stories that teachers tell about their work. They are crafted into compelling narratives, with a beginning, middle, and end, and situated in an event or series of events that unfold over time. Thus, they are usually written **retrospectively**, after you have been wrestling with a teaching issue for a while and actually started to do some thing about it.

The pieces of case writing have a plot that is problem-focused, a problem that you are confronting as you get your project underway. They can become embedded with many problems as they unfold over time. They include the thoughts and feelings of the teacher-writers as they describe their accounts of how they are addressing the problem and what is happening as they do.

Some case writers describe problems that remain unsolved and end their stories with a series of questions about what to do next. Others include solutions that may or may not have worked. They all include reflective comments about their accounts that examine what they have learned from the experience and/or what they may do differently in another similar situation. The piece of case writing should readily answer the question, 'What is this a case of?'

What are the Cases About?

In the VEGPSP the cases should focus on any **compelling issues** you face as you proceed through your project. For instance, someone recently explained to me that they were really concerned at the outset of a Student Action Team approach to values education to make sure they had a 'nice' balance of students involved in the team. She mentioned that she anguished about including one particular little boy who was struggling at school. I inferred that she wanted to include him in the hope that the role assigned to him might make him more engaged at school. She also said that she wanted to use the opportunity to try to give another student some self confidence which she felt the student was lacking. She also wanted the team to act as a support structure for all members. She also wanted it to be a mechanism for negotiating with teachers how what the team came up with might be included in the teaching program of the other teachers involved in the values education project. So her **compelling issue** was how to get a balanced group that might accomplish all of this.

At the time of writing, the group has been formed and is up and running. So the teacher can now tell us who she chose, what processes she used to do so and also provide some account of how it is going. She can continue to write about this or if it is working fine and the issue is no longer so compelling for her she might look to what the next problem/challenge is.

Each piece of case writing should centre on such a **compelling issue**. Things such as the following were compelling issues Stage 1 schools confronted.

- How to get youngsters to treat the environment with more respect
- How to get colleagues on board
- How to get the leadership team on board
- How to get students to listen more attentively
- How to get students to be more self-controlled
- How to have students understand the implications of bullying
- How to get students to line up quietly before class
- How to build positive relationships with students
- How to model 'values behaviours' to my students
- How to get parents to enjoy coming to the school
- How to get child X to control their temper
- How to encourage students in combined classes to work within an acceptable noise level
- How to teach students to ask questions and respect opinions that are different to theirs
- How to teach children 'to have the intellectual courage to put forward their ideas in a group'
- How to listen more carefully to my students
- How to get the staff to trust the students more

What is the Substance of Case Writing?

The substance of any piece of case writing needs to discuss:

- the context (relevant aspects of the course, student population and school);
- the issue (what makes this a compelling issue for you)
- an account of the issue being addressed
- an account of what you actually did to address the issue
- what occurred as a result of your efforts, including any evidence.

What does a Case Writing Narrative Look Like?

Although there is no single formula, all case narratives will have some components in common and will probably be about 2-3 pages long. Whilst the compelling issue can take any form like engaging parents, getting colleagues on board or the like we are especially keen to get some which quite specifically address issues about teaching and learning. What follows explicitly addresses such issues.

Context – Cases are situated in specific locations and at a specific point in time. Describe the particulars in the context. Tell us about the school, the community, the students, the history of the class, and whatever details are relevant to help your reader understand the situation.

Plot – Cases should have a plot. The plot often follows a pattern such as the following:

- You are concerned about some issue that is important for you and needs to be solved before you can move on to the next major phase in your teaching. This is the problem or compelling issue you need to address in your classroom.
- How you propose to address the issue; your intentions, including a rationale for your actions. Your piece of case writing might therefore include discussion about your teaching approach and a discussion of what you expect(ed) students to learn or do, and an intended scenario for how you think your plan might unfold.

However, when you teach, things don't always go quite as planned. Sometimes students don't respond as you expected, or some respond in different ways than others, or they know more or different things than you had predicted, or unexpected blessings or glitches arise. This requires that you adapt to the surprises or otherwise make sense of the events. You may then want to report in your piece of case writing on how the modifications went or simply on how you interpreted what occurred — your sense of why things unfolded as they did.

Problem – Embedded in any act of teaching is a learning problem. The problem for your students comes from their need to know, or know how to do, something that they do not already know or know how to do. The problem for you includes deciding on a set of goals or a standard that you and your students will strive for, deciding on how you and your students will know whether and how they are meeting these goals, and designing learning activities and resources for your students through which they can accomplish what you hope they will. In your piece of case writing, the problem is your sense of what the students needed to learn and the questions you had about how to teach these things to them.

Analysis of the content and learning goals – Because your case is one of learning and teaching in the values education domain you need to include an analysis of the values education 'content' you want to address in the lesson/s, and what you want the students to learn and learn to do, including ways that you want your students to participate in the learning activity and how you want them to learn to participate.

Provide a rationale for why you wanted to teach this content, these skills and concepts and these aspects of participation to this particular group of students at this point in time. Describe your intentions, your anticipations, and your expectations. These typically flow from your rationale. What were you hoping to

accomplish? What did you expect would happen in terms of how students would engage in and learn from the activities you planned? What reactions from your students did you anticipate and prepare for?

What happened? – Bring your readers into your classroom and help them vicariously experience the unfolding events and the questions or dilemmas you struggled with. In developing the sequence of interactions you might include, not necessarily in this order, your first encounters, moments of tension, how you responded, how the students responded, and what the result was.

Evidence of what students learned – You may discuss what happened in many ways — how you perceived what happened, how you felt about the process, how students were engaged, and how students seemed to feel — but you must include some evidence about what students actually learned in relation to your intentions. You can frame this discussion using samples of student work or assessment results (tests, papers, projects, exhibitions or other products); your own observations of their learning before, during, or after this teaching event; or students' reports about their own learning. You may also find that students learned some things differently from or beyond what you intended. This would be equally useful to note. Be sure to describe the variability in student learning outcomes (who learned what) as well as the norm.

An example of case writing

The compelling issue:

Suggests this is a case about improving communication

Let's Talk About Things That Matter- Year Five/Six

Talks about the problem

I care about what my students think. I really do. If only I could finish my sentences and thoughts without interruption or have them focus on one another's opinions instead of them thinking it's all being about 'Me, Me, Me!'

Talks about what she proposes to do

Having recently attended two conferences taken by Art Costa and George Ottero I was struck by a common theme—the importance of relationships, dialogue and listening with empathy and understanding. I decided to implement some practices that might lead to an improvement in our class culture. I wanted to explore how we could develop values education in meaningful ways.

My school was also having a major focus on improving speaking and listening skills aligned to the *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* so the timing was perfect. My class had already done a fair bit by establishing an agreed etiquette for conversations. Using paired listening (*1) and fishbowl strategy (*2) the children had discussed given topics and had been given feedback from their peers on their behaviours. This was a powerful tool and did have some positive effects. Many were more aware of not interrupting and including others but it didn't go far enough as some children still basically didn't really care. They valued different things.

Discusses what she did

We reorganised the classroom furniture so that we could sit in a circle (*3). I introduced 'Talking Sticks' (*4), as I wanted to see how this would effect our conversations. I gave the children a topic- 'What if all children were micro-chipped so that parents could monitor where they were?' They loved the topic and were bursting with ideas. Some children used up their sticks quickly and then were unable to speak. Those that usually dominate discussions found this enormously difficult. They were virtually bursting but interestingly enough did not break the rules of 'the game'. They squirmed on their seats, put their hands over their mouths but said nothing. Frustration increased if they were asked a clarifying question as they lost the chance to express one of their ideas. (Afterwards we discussed this and decided to give each person one stick of designated colour (yellow) to answer a direct clarifying question.) Many students who were quiet had the time and space to express their opinions without fear of interruption. It was a real hit and for days afterwards they asked, 'Can we 'play' sticks again?' We have since 'played sticks' many times and they still enjoy the challenge. They have learnt: 'to be more mindful about what I am going to say', 'not waste my speaking by making funny comments as I don't get my real ideas in', 'be clear about what I am saying so I don't have to answer clarifying questions', 'to listen more carefully to what people are saying.....it helps you not to repeat what someone else has already said cause you want to make your stick count'.

We started to explore issues involving values like, how we might show the values to people new to our community, refugee issues, and school camp. We used X charts to discuss how we would think, what it would look like, sound like, and feel like. In the beginning the children found the 'think like' part hard to do. We talked about how our thinking was where our behaviour came from. 'If I think you are my equal I will treat you as my equal.' 'I think I should give everyone a fair go by passing to everyone in my team.' Over time it became easier for children to reflect on the values and how they related to what we were going to do or to issues we discussed.

Temperature readings (*5) also became part of our class routine. Sometimes it might be a raising of hands with a show of fingers from 1 to 5. The question might be as simple as 'How would you rate your weekend?' 'How are you feeling today?' 'How well do you think you understand X?' These may sound unimportant but the children were then able to comment or pass and I learnt things about them that would have gone unnoticed otherwise. 'I rated a 1 because my dad went back to Sydney last night and I won't see him for another two months. I hate that!' 'I rated a 2 because my grandad went to hospital and he's really sick. Mum's all upset and so am I?'

'I rated a 3 because I keep getting confused about the steps and there was too much noise for me to concentrate when the others had finished and were talking.' I could then respond appropriately at a later time and I believe this made us grow closer. I also shared how I was feeling and about events in my life. I think this helps to 'humanise' us as teachers and increases trust.

In appreciations we had the opportunity to feedback positive things to people. In our first session I was incredibly moved as kids gave me so many appreciations about my teaching, the things we do and who I am. It was unexpected especially with senior kids for whom it is not really seen as cool to openly like a teacher. I glowed inside for days afterwards. If something this simple could make me feel so good what was it doing for the children? I looked at their faces and they were beaming during appreciations- both the giver and receiver.

We have had class meetings in the past as a forum for students to discuss class issues, express concerns and make recommendations. We moved this into part of our circle time quite naturally. New information could be given to clarify why things may have happened the way they did or why people had done certain things. This was compared to how people may have perceived events. This was worthwhile in resolving conflicts or adjusting false impressions. We also used hopes and wishes for planning changes to our class organisation or having some special events.

Another part of our time was using 'circle of voices' (*6). Sometimes this is part of temperature readings but we also use this to discuss issues. At the beginning children needed to have a prop that they passed around to stop others from interrupting. Only those with the 'ball of power' had the right to speak. Gradually this prop has been able to be removed and children wait. If someone interrupts the others are very quick to tell them 'It's not your turn' or 'Excuse me, I haven't finished speaking.'

So now I have the perfect classroom where I am never interrupted and we all treat each other with total respect. That would be nice wouldn't it?

Talks about
outcomes

Sam and Jayden are still learning to manage their impulsiveness and beginning to wait their turn and some still chat when they should be listening. Sometimes I still get very frustrated by their behaviour. So what has changed?

Sam, Jayden (and others) are aware they should be waiting and not interrupting. They apologise to whomever they have interrupted. They wait more often and raise their hand more often. We all know it is something they are working on and encourage them when they have been doing well.

The side chats have lessened and almost never happen in circle time. If they do, they are promptly reminded by the others of what's expected. It is no longer just myself calling for this way of respecting each other.

Our discussions are richer and more inclusive. I regularly hear from everyone in the class, even the quietest of the girls.

Most significantly though I think our relationships have deepened. We know each other far better. We deal with each other honestly and openly. There is a greater sense of trust and safety within our class.

An unexpected spin from this has been their heightened sense of 'expected behaviour' not just in our room. They put everyone under the same scrutiny and have come back with complaints about the way they perceive they are being treated by other students or staff. It was put to one of the boys that I tell them off too and the reply that came back was 'Yes, but it's different when you do it 'cause you understand me.' That blew me away a bit but made me realise how important the relational side of everything we have been doing has been.

Our journey is far from over. After all, we are imperfect people who don't always get it right. From the core of valuing our relationships have come acceptance and a willingness to forgive within our room. One challenge is how to help the kids take these values out beyond our class without being destructive, i.e. using this knowledge to try to bring other people down. It can also be counterproductive if they try to lay these standards and values on others or sit in judgement. This will be a focus in our circle in the next few weeks.

I continue to care about what my students think but I am now far more aware of how they feel. I have come to understand how important our relationships are and how they impact in all of our interactions. My class is already expressing how much closer they have grown and how they will miss being together, and yes I will miss them too.

Future plans.

I will most certainly make circle time a part of my class next year and look forward to watching how it unfolds. The improvement in relationships and improvement in listening has improved our interactions. This flows over to all our time together and makes the time we spend in circles even more worthwhile. Our awareness of values and what they look like, sound like and feel like has increased. In our circle dialogues is where the real thinking like has been happening. A team of teachers has been trialling these strategies at my school. We have all seen it as valuable. We

have put forward a proposal for which will be taking this across the entire school. We believe it will make a positive contribution to our culture as a learning community.

I would encourage teachers to trial these with their students. The same principles and activities can be applied in any subject. Take the time to get to know your students.

***1. Paired Listening**

Practise conversational skills

This is an effective starting point for interactive speaking skills. We had peers assessing how well they used the skills and feeding back to the individual.

2. Fishbowl Strategy

Students sit in two concentric circles. The inner circle students have the dialogue. The outer circle are observers only. They are not allowed to comment. They provide feedback at the end of the session on specific skills.

3. Circles

Circles have become a fundamental part of our dialogue process. The circle is a symbol of unity, equality and cooperation. It promotes working together to support one another and taking equal responsibility.

4. Talking Sticks

Students are given a collection of coloured sticks, (i.e. 3 sticks). In order to take part in the conversation they must throw in one of their sticks. Once all of their sticks are used they cannot say anything further.

5. Temperature Reading

The purpose of temperature reading is for people to get a chance to say what is on their mind and in their heart.

The categories are: appreciations, new information, puzzlements, concerns and recommendations, and hopes.

6. Circle of Voices

Move around the circle allowing everyone to comment without interruption. No one is to comment on what is said until everyone has had his or her chance to speak.

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