Utilizing Case Studies: Connecting the Family, School, and Community

Audrey E. Wright and Cheri Heeren

Abstract

Case studies help future human service professionals understand the need to work collaboratively with each other to address the existing and emerging social challenges that affect children, families, and ultimately the community. The use of “real world” situations challenges pre-professionals to carefully analyze the obvious and hidden needs of individuals/groups, examine the best courses of action, and determine steps that will lead to greater collaboration among service providers. The connection between family, school, and community is emphasized.

Introduction

In cities, suburbs, and rural areas alike, adults and children are increasingly bombarded by the elements of what Garbarino (1995) labels as a socially toxic environment. These include “violence, poverty, and other economic pressures on parents and their children, disruption of family relationships, depression, paranoia, nastiness and alienation” (p. 14). Unfortunately, we can now also add terrorism. In such an environment, educators and social service providers often suffer from insufficient training or expertise that would allow them to deal adequately with the problems children and families are experiencing (NCREL, 1996). During the late 1980s a handful of communities across the state of Missouri began organizing
collaborative groups, believing that better collaboration among service providers would lead to improved services for families and their children (Rozansky, 1997). Today, it is more important than ever for schools, families, and communities to work together to prepare for a more promising future (NCREL, 1996).

In the United States, service providers and related agencies have historically partitioned clients along the lines of their service domains and professional expertise. However, “recent legislation, writing, and policy have re-conceptualized services toward viewing clients as whole units, with interrelated needs and strengths that are not easily divided at the bureaucratic and professional boundaries that have been imposed on them” (Short & Tally, 1999, p. 195). Thus community agencies, health care, social welfare, education, and similar organizations are being encouraged to collaborate together in order to blend their limited resources and offer comprehensive and preventive services that are family focused (NCREL, 1996). In theory, this approach makes a great deal of sense, both in terms of the clients as well as the agencies themselves. However, effective collaboration among agencies will require professionals with competencies that transcend their individual career orientation.

In the traditional pre-service training of education and social service providers, the focus is still solely on issues related to each particular discipline. In education, for example, pre-service educators learn about child development, learning theories, strategies for teaching particular subject areas, and classroom management. Seldom, if ever, are these future educators provided with an opportunity to view the child within a total context. Such an approach diminishes the reality that the child is not just a student but also a member of a family system and a particular community. Unfortunately, this segmented approach is replicated in the fields of social work, criminal justice, and health care. Further, collaborative endeavors require effective communication between all parties and participatory leadership with the ability to negotiate conflict and differences (NCREL, 1996). Thus pre-service teachers and social service workers need to develop new competencies if they are to work together effectively in the future to accomplish a common goal. One way of enabling this is to develop courses that are interdisciplinary. The “School, Community, and Family Connections” course developed by the authors represents one effort to address the development of skills that will enable greater collaboration and greater success in addressing the needs of children, families, and communities as a whole.

A New Approach

School, Community, and Family Connections is a problem-based interdisciplinary course whereby students from a variety of majors discuss and research
real life problems and develop a plan for addressing these challenges. A case study approach was selected because it “encourages students to actively generate solutions to real-life challenges instead of passively receiving theoretical content through lectures” (Wilson, 2000, p. 37). Thus, the scenarios (cases) provided revolve around real holistic challenges faced by children and their families, which ultimately affect the community. The course was designed with input from professors in criminal justice, education, social work, public school professionals, and individuals from social agencies within the region.

The underlying belief of the developers was that the use of scenarios would better prepare pre-professionals in the areas of social work, education, criminal justice, and health to work together to address the challenges they will encounter in their careers. Further, they believed that examining challenges that are often beyond the participants normal range of experiences (as citizens) would motivate them to serve as advocates for children and families in their daily life and thus improve the quality of life for all. The social challenges in our rapidly changing interwoven world require not only the skills of professionals but citizens who are willing to invest in human and social capital.

Goals for the course

Since the University Studies Committee at our campus requires certain strands to be present in all courses, communication, thinking, and valuing were embedded into the goals for this course. The goals also represent the skills professionals in the service areas believe are important to future professionals. Thus the participants in this course were expected to be able to:

- explain how society influences education, families, individuals, and vice versa;
- analyze the factors which have contributed to the success or failure of individuals in order to identify strategies that will enhance people’s potential;
- describe and justify possible solutions for social challenges based upon research of the challenge and what has been tried in the past;
- determine the agencies/organizations within communities that would best be able to address the obvious and not-so-obvious needs of individuals and groups;
- describe ways to develop a better working relationship between the home, school, and service agencies within a community;
- determine the limitations of different systems in addressing the needs of individuals and society;
- describe effective communication strategies for working with different cultural groups and systems/organizations within a community;
demonstrate collaboration and consultation skills both within the university classroom and in field work settings.
While there are other goals the students are expected to attain in this course, these are the ones most closely aligned with the use of case studies.

Scenarios

Utilizing cases studies, students in this interdisciplinary course examine challenges that confront many children and their families and identify organizations/individuals within the larger community with whom they might collaborate to address these challenges. Many educators use case studies to “promote reflection, sharpen observational skills, and foster understanding” of the complexities embedded in different situations (Herman, 1998, p. 39). Hence, the cases were written to focus instruction primarily on problem-based learning, which is not typical at many universities.

Students are required to research information relevant to their particular case, research trends and studies done on the challenges embedded in the scenario, interview people in the field who might work together to provide services that will meet the specific needs of the people identified in their assigned case, and share information gathered with their peers. The different cases were created so that each of the following fields would be discussed within the overall context of the class: political/legal, economic, education, social work, health (mental and physical), spirituality, and criminal/juvenile justice. Each group of 4–5 students is assigned a case with multiple challenges thus requiring them to access different sources. Students can use group chat rooms to discuss the questions they have regarding their scenarios and the information they have found. During the presentations, all students are required to analyze the appropriateness of the solutions to the scenario under discussion. They are also expected to discuss ways to actively alleviate similar everyday challenges faced by individuals, families, agencies, and communities.

Pre-post study

According to Dolmans, Snellen-Balendong, Wolfhagen, and Van Der Vleuten (1997), effective cases should be designed using the following principles: they should be relevant to the students’ future profession; stimulate self-directed learning; enhance students’ interest by stimulating discussions around possible solutions; and match at least some of the goals for the course. We believe the cases developed for this course meet these broad principles. However, it should be noted that the Peter scenario below is used only for the purpose of pre-post assessment. Those written for students to actually research and discuss are developed on this
model. The Peter scenario is shared here because it was used to collect data that would allow us to analyze the effectiveness of the case-study approach to teaching/learning relevant to the goals for this particular interdisciplinary course.

*Initial Scenario:*

Peter is a 6-year-old boy whose family represents a minority group in the U. S. Peter’s mother is unable to care for him; thus, his aunt has legal custody. However, she has had a recent stroke and is having trouble speaking. Peter has two brothers, one of whom was recently jailed; the other one is in the army. Peter is very attached to his 18 year-old sister, but she is living in a halfway house for drug abusers. Peter attends a school where about a quarter of the population qualifies for free or reduced-cost lunch. Peter is a chronic behavior problem in his classroom. He is loud and impulsive and has developed few inner controls. He is very jealous of other children and tends to bully them. His sense of humor and his affection for adults are the traits that keep his teacher trying with Peter. She has found that he responds to physical affection and to gentle teasing.

“One important component of the case study approach is the use of a written question guide to facilitate class discussions” and research (Wilson, 2000, p. 38). Using this framework also helps students analyze the cases and encourages them to think more critically (Grossman, 1994). Since each group of two to four students are given the same scenario to research, they must consider the challenges and possibilities embedded in the case from different perspectives. Thus the following questions were created to coach the students in their analysis of real-life challenges and the generation of possible solutions to these.

*Guidelines for research and presentation format:*

Section 1: What are the obvious and not-so-obvious needs of each of the individual(s) in the case provided? What questions do you have about the case? What other information would be useful to finding solutions? How has the family system and/or community contributed to the challenges embedded in this case? What does the literature tell us about the past, present, and future challenges embedded in this scenario and communities’ responsiveness to these?

Section 2: Which agencies/organizations should be involved in helping the individual(s) in this scenario based on the information provided? What specific services might these different agencies/organizations provide? What
limitations do these groups have in terms of their ability to provide the services you have listed above? How can people gain information about these agencies/organizations? Consider the following questions as you interview people from different agencies/organizations: What led to the agency’s existence? How have they evolved? What role is the organization expected to assume by the community? How are they funded? What challenges do they presently face?

Section 3: How do these agencies/organizations presently work together? How can a trusting relationship be developed among the different agencies/organizations and between the people they are serving? What methods of communication would be most effective in connecting the different parties together? Which professional/agency should take the lead in implementing and monitoring a collaborative effort to meet the needs of the individuals involved? Why? What different perspectives will each member of the team bring?

Section 4: How might a democratic society ensure that challenges such as those encountered by the family in your scenario are prevented or adequately addressed? What specifically might you do as both a professional and a concerned citizen?

Research Method

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of using case studies in this course, the authors decided to examine the students’ responses to the initial scenario about Peter using a scoring guide. These guides were designed by the authors to align with our expectations in response to the questions asked in each section outlined above. They were field tested by grading students’ required case study papers in two different sections. The authors then discussed the ease of using the scoring guide as well as its connection to the questions asked and our expectations. The revised scoring guide was then used by both of the authors to assess ten randomly selected pre-post Peter. This helped us establish inter-rater reliability and further refine the scoring guide.

Students were given the Peter case on the first day of class and asked to respond to the questions provided by the following class session. Students were only asked to respond to one or two of the questions found in each of the areas 1-3 above. During the last week of class, the students were again asked to respond to the Peter case using some of the insight they had gained by using the case study approach during the semester.
We were particularly interested in whether the student’s ability to identify all of the obvious and not-so-obvious needs of all of the people in the scenario and the community had increased. Secondly, we were interested in learning whether the students had a greater knowledge of the various agencies available in communities to address people’s needs, as well as the limitations of these agencies. While our students might have possessed knowledge of several agencies at the beginning of the class, we also wanted to see if they could identify relevant agencies which might in reality be able to service the different individual’s needs/concerns. A five-point scale was used to evaluate students’ responses related to each of these two areas. The last area we decided to analyze was students’ understanding of ways professionals could effectively collaborate to meet people’s needs. A three-point scale was used to determine whether the students could identify effective and practical ways to collaborate together to address the needs embedded in the Peter scenario. See Figure 1.

There were a total of 42 students enrolled in the two classes studied. The classes met at the same time for three hours per week. While each had a different instructor, students were often put together at the outset of the class to listen to guest speakers or watch introductory videos. Each group had the same syllabus and the instructors met weekly to discuss the course content and processes.
**Figure 1. Scoring Guide for Pre- and Post-Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Focus is entirely on individual's (Peter's) obvious needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Focus is on individual's obvious needs with minor reference to needs which may be less evident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Describes obvious needs of family members or discusses them in relationship to only one individual (Peter).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Obvious and not-so-obvious needs of most members of the family are discussed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Obvious and not-so-obvious needs of each member in the family are discussed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Focus is primarily on obvious needs.
- Family dynamics are discussed as part of the needs.
- It is evident that the writer is able to read between the lines in the scenario.
- Possible underlying causes for different members needs may be included.

- Obvious and not-so-obvious needs of each member in the family are discussed.
- Possible underlying causes are addressed.
- Needs that may go beyond the immediate individual/family are also considered. For example, need for school (teacher), need for community to improve the quality of life for children.

- One or two agencies are described in general terms along with some possible ways they might meet the individual's needs (Peter).
- Limitations are not addressed or focus on limitations in the family.

- Obvious and not-so-obvious needs of each member in the family are discussed.
- Possible underlying causes are addressed.
- Needs that may go beyond the immediate individual/family are also considered. For example, need for school (teacher), need for community to improve the quality of life for children.

- Several agencies/individuals are identified in terms of meeting the obvious and not-so-obvious needs of the major character(s).
- The limitations or guidelines of the agency/individuals are addressed in general terms.

- Several agencies/individuals are identified and their possible services described, but not all may be appropriate.

- Several agencies/individuals are identified and their possible services described, but not all may be appropriate.
- The limitations/guidelines of some of the agencies are clarified.

- Appropriate methods of communication are identified that will enable the agencies to collaborate effectively with each other to meet the needs of the individual(s) in the scenario and are clearly articulated. Methods of communication between the agencies and the family/individuals within the scenario are realistic given the environmental circumstances and cultural values of the family/individual, and are likely to result in greater trust between all. The person or agency that should oversee services is clearly identified and a rationale provided for this choice.

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Findings and Reflections

Figure 2 below shows the pre-post results to the three areas assessed. The scores of both classes have been compiled together for ease of discussion since there was little variation between the two classes in terms of change.

**Figure 2.** Pre- and Post-Analysis Results

![](image)

In evaluating the pre-post scores relevant to identifying the obvious and less obvious *needs* of the people in the case, we learned that for the most part students finished the course still focusing primarily on the obvious needs of the major character in the case. While a few tended to be more cognizant of the needs of other family members, their concern for others tended to be in terms of how the needs of others affected the major character (Peter). Nevertheless, the post results show that some students are able to focus on the obvious and less obvious needs of others by the end of the class. However, no one identified needs that went beyond the family. Thus we found that no one acknowledged the needs of teachers trying to educate a child who is consumed by family problems, or a community’s challenge to address the seemingly endless war on drugs and juvenile delinquency.

There may be several reasons for the lack of significant difference between the pre-post scores in this area. One is that because of their own personal life experiences, educational experiences, or both, students tend to focus on the needs of the child in the case. The majority of the students in these two courses were elementary or early childhood majors. Thus, focusing on Peter would be the type of exercise they would do in the majority of their courses. Secondly, they may have the
sense that for professionals to have needs may show they are less than competent. Thirdly, the title of the scenario itself may inadvertently cause students to think they are to focus on Peter. Lastly, the questions students are asked to respond to may focus attention primarily on one family member. Thus, the title given cases must be carefully analyzed, not just the content. Likewise, questions, while extremely important to the case study approach, must be in line with the goals desired.

The service area in Figure 2 shows the most growth on the part of the students. While many students could initially identify one or two agencies or individuals that might address the needs they saw embedded in the scenario, the number they could describe definitely increased. However, what did not always increase or expand was a description of the limitations of the agencies/individuals in providing the needed services. In many instances, the students focused on the limitations imposed by the family rather than limitations that a particular agency might have. For example, one student wrote that “you cannot force people to use the services that are available to them” rather than delineating the fact that income guidelines that an agency must use in order to determine if someone can receive public health care puts constraints on whom they can service.

In reflecting on our scoring guide and students’ responses in this area, we recognized that it was often difficult to analyze the person’s response. A student may have been able to clearly describe many more agencies than in the pre-test but fail to explain the limitations of each of these agencies. Thus, the score s/he received was lower. Thus a clear picture of students’ growth in this area may not be reflected because of the different types of information required at each level. In the future it would probably be best to separate out the agencies that could service the needs identified in the case from the limitations of each of these agencies. It does appear, however, that the students were able to transfer the information they researched and shared relevant to the cases they were assigned in class to the Peter scenario.

The last area evaluated in Figure 2, communication, required the students to discuss how a trusting relationship could be developed among all of the agencies/individuals involved in addressing the needs they identified in the Peter case. They were also asked to identify who would best serve as the advocate for the family in terms of ensuring that all needs were addressed by the different agencies. How the agencies could best communicate was also part of the required task. This area is one that we see needs a great deal of work. Even in discussing other cases in class, students have consistently been weak in suggesting ways for agencies to effectively collaborate.

While students can research what is provided by different agencies using web pages, brochures, and professional journals, information related to collaboration is less frequently available. A brochure put out by the Department of Family Services
or a web page of a school generally will not explain how it interfaces with other agencies. While the students are asked to interview people from the different agencies that might be used in their personally assigned case, many do not do this. Further, even when they do, the agency’s representative may not describe how they interact with other agencies.

Another possible explanation might be that many agencies do not actively and systematically communicate with each other about ways to address the needs of particular clients. Many agencies in Missouri and elsewhere are only now beginning to actually think about how to collaborate on a regular basis, thus they are less able to articulate this to others. Furthermore, collaboration is always in process and evolving based on the demands placed upon the different agencies. Caring Communities, for example, is built on the notion of collaboration, yet because it is a building block process, it is harder to describe what takes place within the Center on a daily basis. Thus in the area we have labeled communication, we may need to provide more explicit examples of how agencies can collaborate together. In other words, relying on students to gain the information called for in this area may not be best served by utilizing individual case studies alone.

Another alternative is to have the students decide who should provide the principal actors in the case with information on resources/agencies available in the community and why. Secondly, they could be asked to interview several of the agencies they recommend in terms of ways these agencies presently collaborate with other agencies.

While we did not correlate or examine statistically the differences between the non-traditional adult learner and the typical nineteen or twenty-year old college student’s response, we would also suggest that others experimenting with the use of case studies take this into consideration.

The development and utilization of a scoring guide to evaluate the growth of our students has enabled us to reflect on areas where more work is needed to utilize case studies more effectively in this interdisciplinary course. We also believe that giving the scoring guides to the students may provide them with a clearer vision of the expectations in such a course. Since the majority of students are accustomed to lecture courses with established criteria for earning an ‘A’ in the class, this may increase their comfort level as they transition into a more constructivist form of learning.

**Conclusion**

The majority of models on case studies involve their use in courses designed for a particular discipline or field of study such as business, sociology, or educa-
tion. Hence, we have found few models to follow. Likewise, as Kleinfeld (1990) points out, it is often difficult to find good case material. This is especially true for an interdisciplinary course such as ours. However, we believe that the creation of cases based on real-life situations for this interdisciplinary course allows students to examine challenges more holistically and provides them with insight into some of the challenges associated with accessing services when, in fact, they are available.

The life experiences of the majority of college students is often far removed from the realities faced by many of the individuals they will be responsible for serving in their professional lives. Likewise, the fact that the majority of service professionals’ educational studies center around content from their own major, they often find it difficult to move out of the “box” associated with their discipline without such an interdisciplinary course. Grupe and Jay (2000) claim that the benefit of using the case method for college students is the fact that they are “real world” and “help students see the real applications of their class work” (p. 123). Feedback from our students both formally and informally leads us to concur with Grupe and Jay’s assertions. Thus, the impact of the use of case studies on our students’ beliefs and attitudes, while not addressed in our initial limited study, is an area that needs to be assessed in future research.

Glezen (2000) claims that utilizing case studies forces students to move out of the role of passive observers and makes them partners in the learning process. The following reflections on the course by three of our students help to highlight why we believe refinement of the use of cases in our course is worth the effort: “I have learned a lot of information in this class. It has been a class that challenged my thinking as an individual and professional.” “I came into this class thinking you would tell us about the connections between the family, school, and community. Instead, I was constantly challenged to look beyond the obvious to find root causes and plausible solutions.” “I never left this class without having to think deeply about how I could make a difference.” Isn’t this last comment what we want our graduates, especially those in the human service areas, to daily consider in their profession? If case studies can indeed get students to move beyond the mere accumulation of information to actively engage them in the thinking process, then their use should be more fully implemented into university courses.

In order for students to see the interconnectedness between the family, school, and community, we challenged our future professionals/citizens to actively participate in their own learning. Educators must continue to seek ways to move students out of the “boxes” artificially imposed upon them both academically and, historically, by government agencies. Our initial experience has reinforced the notion that case studies do indeed have the potential to do this. It has reaffirmed the common adage:

“I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.”
References


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Audrey Wright is a full professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Central Missouri State University. She has had extensive experience with curriculum development in K-12 schools and universities in the United States. She has also researched and developed many integrated courses internationally.

Cheri Heeren is the Executive Director for the Pettis County Community Partnership in Sedalia, Missouri, which is part of Missouri’s Caring Communities initiative for improving outcomes for children and families. She is highly respected for her work in connecting families, schools, and the community.