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Case writing as a signature pedagogy in education leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to propose, as a candidate for a signature pedagogy, a method centered on case writing and peer review.

Design/methodology/approach – In this method, aspiring education leaders use the writing of case studies – frequently featuring themselves as an actor in a narrative of organizational development or change – to advance their reflection in and on action. The study is then shared with members of the candidate's peer group (cohort members, faculty, or senior practitioners) as a step to building and integrating the candidate in a community of practice. To illustrate, the authors publish the case of a novice school-leader's voyage to create unity and solidarity among a divided staff. The paper shows that case writing can enrich our arsenal of pedagogies that move the novice beyond the dualism of scholarship and practice.

Findings – Case writing uniquely facilitates reflection-in-action and the building of communities of practice.

Practical implications – Innovative pedagogies are required if practitioner education and training are to take their distinct place next to that of researchers and academics.

Originality/value – This paper describes the use of case writing cum peer review as a tool to develop the practical knowledge of fledgling educational leaders.

Keywords Leadership development, Learning, Tacit knowledge, Case studies, Peer Review

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The notion of signature pedagogy has gained rapid acceptance since it was first introduced by Shulman (2004, 2005a, b) during his presidency of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning. Under Shulman's direction, the foundation has sponsored a series of studies of signature pedagogies in the professions. Studies on the signature pedagogies of the fields of law and the clergy have been published (Sullivan *et al.*, 2007; Foster *et al.*, 2005). Others on engineering and medicine are still in progress. The Carnegie foundation has likewise spearheaded a study aimed at reviving the EdD – the doctorate for education professionals and practitioners – and clarifying the unique teaching and learning requirements in education leadership (Perry and Imig, 2008). Increasingly, students of teaching and learning in educational leadership are beginning to take up the challenge of exploring which signature pedagogies our field might sport (Black and Murtadha, 2007; Olson and Clark, 2009).

Why the need for special pedagogies beyond straightforward lecture and discussion? Because, as Shulman explains, a "professional is not someone for whom understanding is sufficient . . . A professional has to be prepared to act, to perform, to practice, whether they have enough information or not . . . You've got to act on the fly with insufficient information. It's true of a surgeon during an operation; it's true of a member of the clergy counseling the bereaved. Action is equally important, maybe more important, than understanding" (Shulman, 2005b, p. 3).

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In contrast to the education of researchers or scholars, professionals must have good judgment and practical knowledge, which cannot be taught in the lecture hall. Medicine is a case that has long utilized teaching methods designed to do that:

> You come to a room where a patient who is on your docket is in bed. Somebody on the team knows that their responsibility is to report on a patient, and then to explain what's happened since the last time they rounded, what's going to happen next, and then to take questions about the situation from colleagues on the team. The routine is such that everybody knows what they're supposed to do (Shulman, 2005b, p. 6).

Medical rounds are the signature pedagogy in the education of medical doctors where they learn not only "know-what" (technical knowledge about medications or diseases), but also to "know how": how to read certain signs of a recovering patient, how to approach her on medical, but also on a personal and moral level.

In this paper we propose case writing as a signature pedagogy in educational leadership. Case writing is a method that can integrate the strength of existing pedagogies – including problem-based learning (Bridges and Hallinger, 1997), site-based administrator research (Anderson and Jones, 2000), shadowing encounters (Polite *et al.*, 1997), public reflection (Raelin, 2001), or internship portfolios (Devlin-Scherer and Devlin-Scherer, 2003) – while satisfying many of the requirements of Shulman's signature pedagogy.

Unlike other recent proposals involving the use of case studies for leadership preparation (Cranston, 2008; Sherman, 2008) in which students discuss ready-made case studies, a key element of the method sketched here is for future education leaders to write their own cases and use the case writing as a tool of reflective practice. As proposed here, it can also be instrumental in the formation of a community of practice.

The pedagogy of case writing

The case writing pedagogy draws on the fact that most students in leadership programs bring considerable organizational experience from current or former jobs to their academic work. They are also likely to be members of a cohort of peers with whom they share time in academic classes, fieldwork, etc. The class work of these students will frequently touch on their experiences in their present or prior employment or leadership. With good leadership, the seminar sessions can grow from information exchange to collective reflections and to the writing and critique of cases as described in Table I.

Cohort members are encouraged to pursue "real life/real time" case projects, and to record their experience in a written dossier. The ultimate goal is the construction of a case narrative that can be shared with peers in- and outside the cohort. Once the case has assumed a reasonably fixed form, the instructor organizes a peer review of the case during which members of the cohort and others provide comment and critique (see Table I).

Unlike other methods in which cases are developed by external consultants (Cranston, 2008) to discuss possible courses of action or to "visualize" scenarios of conflict they may confront (Sherman, 2008), the process suggested here differs in three dimensions:

(1) It begins with students constructing and framing the problem rather than working from pre-defined, pre-framed problems (Copland, 2000).

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Steps 1 and 2: identifying a case-worthy story	In a cohort of 12 or so practitioners, someone will have problematic, non-routine events to report at any given point. Identifying these stories from among the routine bric-a-brac of professional life is the job of the cohort leaders. Alternatively, a case study can also focus on capturing an administrator's routine work in fine-grained detail ("a week in the life . . . ") as a platform for the review of an aspirant's leadership style and mental models
Steps 3 and 4: writing the case	Once a student (or group of students) has identified a "case-worthy story", their learning is likely to go through a number of stages in which their view of the case changes: 1. "I know the case inside-out. All I need to do is to write it up." In this first stage the case is seen merely as an interesting, but unproblematic sequence of events. That confidence is soon shaken, as the writer struggles with the specific framing of the case. The frustrations and confusion that inhere in this process reflect real difficulties of learning to view a set of events from one's own and others' perspective. This involves, for example, moving back and forth between an actor and observer perspective. Also, the case writer realizes, albeit at first dimly, that the reality that she took for granted, takes on different aspects when viewed with greater detachment. 2. Having written a first draft of the case, the student realizes that the way the case reads is not the way the story unfolds in his or her mind. Major points of interest don't come across, important issues are glossed over, unimportant ones get too much space. As the case-writer tries to develop the story to make it more realistic, he or she learns that telling a story forces the writer to make choices that will influence the reader's impression. Is a particular configuration of facts to be described as "a given" (an event) or as the result of the action of certain players? This involves attributing agency to actors. Actors in the case may change character based on the choice of one adjective versus another. Does a supervisor's detail-orientation reflect the person's "thoroughness" or is she simply "dull"? Is a colleague's "reliability" a sign of integrity or of a lack of imagination? 3. Without resolving these problems, there is no story. Resolving them forces a deeper level of reflection. At this stage the writer's mindset may change from a protagonist-centered to a more nuanced view that accepts the reality of multiple perspectives of reality. Similarly, the writer may realize that he does not only enter on the "solution" side of the case, but also on its "problem side"
Steps 5 and 6: inviting peer judgment and feedback	Once a story is constructed and a case written, it may take on a life of its own as the writer's peers comment and critique the case. This discussion becomes a critical experience for the case writer and the group. It is in this discourse that practical knowledge of school leaders surfaces and is made explicit. The discussion also represents an opportunity for novice professionals to fine-tune their judgment. What makes peer criticism particularly important is that it comes from a group of sympathetic and knowledgeable neutrals. In the case below, "Linda" concluded that some comments allowed her to see the situation from an entirely different perspective, highlighting the inconsistencies in her intended behavior and her actions. This self-confrontation is one of the most difficult parts of becoming a reflective practitioner because it threatens one's own belief system and ideology

Table I.
Case writing and peer review – practical steps

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(2) It develops the cohort into a community of practice around the students' shared reflection on their leadership experience.
(3) Most importantly, it challenges students to go beyond "textbook learning" by confronting the biases of their leadership style in action and interrogate their taken-for-granted assumptions.

In the remainder of this paper, we detail the method, develop its underlying assumptions, and provide an illustrative example. We discuss the importance of practical knowledge, its tacit nature, and case writing as a tool to bring that knowledge to the surface and subject it to collective reflection. We illustrate the model for the case of Linda, a first year, African-American principal of a middle-school that is undergoing dramatic demographic and cultural change. Assisted by the continuous critical conversation with the members of her peer group, this principal achieved deeper learning during which she switches from the image of a "heroic change agent fighting a toxic culture" to one in which she figures as a leader-learner, listening, understanding and validating the teachers' concerns.

The role of practical knowledge

For the purposes of this paper, we define practical knowledge as a leader's ability to judge a situation of organizational stress appropriately and timely, including, where necessary, to challenge their own and other's dominant frames and explore alternative ones (Bolman and Deal, 1997). Our definition parallels Argyris and Schon's (1996) idea of double loop learning, which they define as a learning process that exceeds the conventional action → outcome → refined action single loop cycle, to include the "governing variables" or "frames" (in our preferred terminology) that define the situation in which the action takes place. Double loop learning will thus take the form of action → outcome → exploring alternative frames/governing variables → refined action (Argyris, 1976, 1993).

The cycle of self-fueling misperceptions

Like Argyris and Schön (1996), we stress the importance of reflecting not only on the governing variables of the organization, but also on one's own dispositions, values, and mental models. Because leaders-in-action face resistance while operating under uncertainty, they are often under pressure to save face, and to be viewed as correct and successful. This can lead to defensive behaviors such as making inferences from events without reality testing, treating one's own views as "obviously" correct, suppressing negative feelings, or attribute their causation to others, and creating self-fulfilling prophecies, as "opponents" "talk back" in the terms we use to define them.

The tacit nature of practical knowledge

To break out of the cycle of self-fueling misperceptions leaders often rely on external interventions in the form of experts who help organizational members to entertain alternative mental models. More recent thinking about the improved use of practical knowledge in organizations focuses on the role of intuition (Sadler-Smith and Burke, 2009), the use of story and narrative (Danzig, 1999) and the harnessing of tacit knowledge (Argyris, 1999; St. Germain and Quinn, 2005; Meyer, 2002, 2003; Sternberg and Horvath, 1999; Patel *et al.*, 1999). Using the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge of teacher and student, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) developed a useful typology depicting how learning takes place in the form of several "knowledge

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conversion" processes (Table II). Traditional academic learning limits the learning process to the explicit knowledge dimension. In experiential learning, however, both the students' and the teacher's tacit knowledge are of key importance. The importance of tapping a teacher's tacit knowledge is seen in the apprenticeship model and its irreducible role in many realms of teaching and learning, including in doctoral education. The importance of tapping and surfacing a student's tacit knowledge stems from the need to instill confidence in their practical judgment by engaging and revising their tacit assumptions about leadership and themselves.

Distinguishing between tacit and explicit knowledge on the part of the teacher and the students generates a two-by-two matrix as follows (Table II):

(1) *Tacit to tacit*. Apprenticeship – the transmission of experiential or implicit knowledge via observation and imitation. In this situation, neither the "teachers" nor the "students" have a conceptual understanding of the knowledge or skill involved, which escapes formalization.

(2) *Explicit to tacit*. Knowledge that exists in explicit and systematic form (textbook/manuals), but that must be internalized and made automatic (like driving a car). Although it exists as formal knowledge (driver's manual), this kind of knowledge needs to sink into the tacit realm to become effective.

(3) *Explicit to explicit*. This is the category in which most of conventional instruction takes place; both factual knowledge as well as theoretical knowledge are transmitted through lectures, textbooks, readings.

(4) *Tacit to explicit*. This is the conversion promoted by case writing. Sometimes tacit knowledge (practical knowledge, intuition, etc.) acquired through work in the field ("on the job," internship, etc.) can and should be surfaced and made explicit through processes of reflection in action and on action to advance the knowledge base of a community of practice.

In the terminology of knowledge conversion, the medical rounds are an almost ideal arena of learning. They do the explicit to tacit (drill and habituation), the tacit to explicit ("why do you want to know about that?"), and the tacit to tacit ("this is how it is done"). The only thing they are not very good for is straight lecture, explicit to explicit. They "put you on the spot" and make you accountable (you are responsible to know the latest about a certain number of patients); there is uncertainty and improvisation within bounds (something can happen to a patient while you are there),

Student knowledge	Teacher knowledge: Tacit	Teacher knowledge: Explicit
Tacit		
Learning model	Apprenticeship/learning by doing	Reflection in/on action
Pedagogy	On the job learning/internship	Case writing
Explicit		
Learning model	Skill drill	Theory; knowing-what
Pedagogy	In-basket exercises	Lecture; readings; discussion

Table II. Teacher-student knowledge conversion

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and they are formative in that they allow the senior professionals to model the desired kind of behavior.

While traditional academic instruction tends to employ only one of the four knowledge conversions (explicit-explicit), the case writing cum peer critique can serve as pedagogy in all four learning modes. However, to access and surface tacit knowledge requires that we reverse the usual pedagogical direction. Instead of students meeting academics on their ground, academics need to meet students on theirs'. This requires that we view prospective school-leaders as professionals-in-action. Many of the things we expect them to learn they already know, albeit tacitly. The purpose of the training is not to teach them something unfamiliar, but to help them become competent and confident stewards of their experience. Viewed this way, the confrontation of our future school-leaders with their own practice becomes a source of a genuine learning. Case writing is one possible instrument to facilitate that confrontation. Without it, rookie leaders are more likely to shuttle between formulaic employment of theory on the one hand and "gut feeling" on the other.

What is a case?

Essentially, a case is a story that is interesting to a specific audience, in our case educational leaders or leaders-to-be. What, then, is a story and what makes it interesting to aspiring or practicing leaders?

The vast majority of social action is routine, as our life is guided by scripts, and schemata, norms and rules. We walk into a restaurant, sit down, take the menu, order, eat, leave a tip. We drive to an airport, check-in, pass security, board the plane, and take off. Accounts of routine events are usually without particular interest. "I was going down the street and the sun was shining" is not a story. But, "I was going down the street when a pedestrian got hit by a car" is (Bruner, 1997).

A non-routine sequence of events creates a narrative arc in need of resolution. Neither the actual flow of events, nor the listener's curiosity can come to rest until the tension that drives the story forward is resolved. Unlike an account of routine events, a story engages the reader's emotions ("I hope no-one is seriously hurt"), cognition ("how did this happen?"), and imagination ("is the pedestrian a local?"). Most importantly, a story also calls for our judgment: "did the pedestrian and/or driver act wisely? Would we have acted differently in the same situation?" A story is thus a non-routine sequence of events that engages the listener/reader's senses and challenges her to a judgment as to the protagonist's actions. The more non-routine the sequence of events, the more challenging the protagonist's problem, the more interesting the case.

To be interesting for a particular audience like leaders in education, a story must exhibit not only fidelity to the facts of the field and chronological coherence, but also evocativity, as Halverson (2004) pointed out in a pioneering paper. The latter criteria means that the story "rings true" to the expert audience because it speaks to an important problem of the field. The more evocative, the greater the likelihood that a story will enter a field's lore of narrative knowledge (Anderson and Page, 1995).

An illustrative example

In this section we present a case that evokes a number of practitioner dilemmas, from pacing oneself in a first-year leadership position, to issues of culture change, and problems of diversity and inter-ethnic cooperation. The case centers on Linda, a new principal of a middle school who also was a member of a doctoral cohort in an education administration or leadership program. The school in this case had

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undergone rapid demographic and ethnic changes, and experienced repeated turnover of leadership. As an African-American woman in a school with a largely white faculty and a predominantly black student body, the new principal's leadership was put to the test from day one.

Manleigh Middle School is a sprawling suburban that used to be the pride of the district. Its mostly white, well-to-do families considered it a badge of honor that Manleigh was their local junior high school since it signified that you lived in the wealthier part of town. Recently, however, Manleigh underwent a period of absorbing an influx of families of all ethnicities, as well as a huge migration of Haitian and other Caribbean immigrants.

The principalship of Manleigh's beloved long-term principal had ended after 18 years due to his illness. In the last four years of his tenure when his illness had debilitated him, the Teachers Association had assumed many administrative responsibilities. Their agenda was one of improving teachers' working conditions. In the interim three other principals had attempted to lead Manleigh. In the midst of all this, the demographics at Manleigh shifted to a minority population of 70 percent, state scores fell, and some parents moved their children to other districts or to private schools.

It was under these conditions that the new principal, Linda Simmons, began her principalship at Manleigh. The staff adopted a wait-and-see attitude. As the veteran staff proudly announced to anyone who would listen, they had seen several other principals come and go in the last five years. Their hope was that Linda would bring what they saw as their biggest need – disciplining the unruly children and restoring quiet and order to their halls.

Soon enough the honeymoon period was over. In response to teachers' request for help with disciplinary matters, Central Administration had allotted Manleigh two part-time deans four years ago. The deans would wait in their office for students who had committed an infraction in the classroom. The deans would then mete out the consequences under the auspices of the two assistant principals or the principal, who used to rubber-stamp their decisions.

One afternoon in October, Dean Anne appeared in Linda's office in tears. Audrey, the assistant principal, had raised her voice and told Anne that she did not have time to deal with her question right then. Hearing of Anne's visit to the principal, various members of the Association left their classrooms to support Anne. Later, in response to a student threat Anne called the police without informing Linda.

Things reached their peak when at an emergency teacher-only meeting of the Association Linda and her assistant principals were blamed for every episode of student misbehavior that had occurred this school year. Linda was bitter and decided to stop meeting with the Association.

Linda reflected on her course of action. She knew she needed to build coalitions with those teachers who were being discouraged from putting the needs of their students first. Linda decided she would appoint a team leader for each of the eight teams, with the understanding that this would be a rotating position. Linda decided if she carefully selected the inaugural teacher-leaders, she could build a cadre of teachers who would be willing to talk to her directly, whose values were aligned with hers, who believed the children of Manleigh could achieve.

Last but not least, something drastic had to be done about Anne. Anne had used her position of dean for the last four years to create dissension, and appease teachers by ridding them of "undesirable" students. Linda decided to take the unpopular step of

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removing Anne from her deanship and returning her to the classroom. When she had the conversation with Anne to apprise her of her plans, Anne was outraged and stated that everyone else had been pleased with her work. She stated that she had been dean for many years, and she would only stay if she could continue in that position – she would not return to the classroom teach. The Association circulated a petition for the continuation of Anne in that position. Linda thanked them for their concern, and posted the position anyway.

Peer review: inducing narrative change

To invite comment and perspective on Linda's leadership, the Manleigh case was presented to members of Linda's doctoral cohort. Many identified the problems similar to this assistant principal:

> Linda claimed to support collaborative efforts, but her approach was often authoritarian. It is difficult for a new administrator to enter an organization and immediately implement change. Without support from the teachers, any change initiative on her part would certainly fail. It would have been advisable to first address some of the concerns aired by the faculty. This would have diffused the initial animosity allowing her to build a base of support from within the Teachers' Association.

Another cohort member, a department chair, wrote:

> Instead of adopting a "me against them" mindset which would mirror the "us against them" mindset of the teachers, Linda needs to listen carefully to learn and understand the reasons for the discontent. She must take some actions that disarm some of the negativity and slowly win some trust. Provide opportunities for teachers to communicate with you in small groups as well as one on one. Take clear but simple steps to address the discipline issues that will meet with wide approval. Definitely redefine, restructure the dean positions. Respect the wisdom of the most senior teachers, however sour they may have become. Create opportunities for them to share their (happy) stories, best practices, or special lessons.

Another department chair was even more critical:

> For Linda to be surprised or affronted by the events is a mark of her personal defensiveness in this particular position . . . although Linda has positive goals for the school's students, her reactiveness to the coalitions of power in the school, her ignorance of personnel relations, and her inability to establish a positive new agenda, limit her effectiveness. She cannot ignore their concerns. Linda should decrease her focus on power struggles, and instead begin to develop practical, helpful, concrete improvements.

As she engaged the comments from her peers, Linda was able to accept points that – as she later pointed out – she would not have accepted had they come from within the school. She thus deepened her understanding of the situation, the actors, and especially of herself as a leader. She moved from a mechanical use of theory ("this place needs a culture change") to a form of learning that drew on her tacit knowledge, and led her to reflect on her "theories-in-use". Initially, Linda considered the locus of the problem as "out there," and herself as in possession of the solution. In the course of writing and discussing her case, she came to view herself as part of the solution and the problem. She realized that to be effective as a change-agent, she had to make "their problem" her problem.

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From single to double loop learning

Linda starts out believing that the situation requires a "show of strength." She feels that given the leadership vacuum, the widespread dissatisfaction with student discipline, and the fact that parts of the teaching staff had involved themselves in administrative tasks in recent years, she needed to establish her authority. She believed that the teachers' complaints about student discipline were likely exaggerated and possibly a result of their not being used to teach a diverse student population. When the "dean of students" challenged her authority by calling the police to school in a student-discipline case without Linda's permission, Linda felt that she had to take a stand. She also felt confirmed in her diagnosis of the situation by what she had learned in her graduate program about organizational culture and power.

It is important to point out that Linda's initial assessment of the situation at her school was by no means extreme or unusual. Many new principals would probably have arrived at a similar judgment. In fact, single loop learning seems especially likely where situational newness and pressure to act coincide, because that situation invites a leader's quick commitment to his or her initial assessment – however tentative – and thus to face-saving defensiveness.

Discovering a new narrative

In the course of the case writing and prompted by the responses from her peers, Linda's learning advances as she moves beyond viewing her story as one of race and power to one of empathy and concern for a much-tested staff. Accordingly, her plan of action changes from "culture change" to one of listening, understanding and validating the teachers' concerns. Linda was able to reframe her situation and adopt a new narrative because the case writing allowed her to see herself as part of the problem. By accepting the principalship, Linda in a sense also accepted ownership of the school's history and problems. Seen from that angle, the Manleigh teachers appeared less as meddlers than as hardy survivors of unusually trying circumstances.

Among the many books Linda read during course work, Bolman and Deal's "reframing organizations" was one of her favorites. The authors' contention that leaders ought to consider organizational problems from different perspectives – notably the structural, community, political, and cultural – made eminent sense to her. Recalling her prior leadership experience, Linda found many examples where she had preferred one or another of the four frames, which had led to a truncated view of the reality in which she operated. In particular, Linda found that she had ignored the importance of the cultural dimension in her previous leadership practice.

While formal course work in organization analysis (such as reading and assimilating the ideas in Bolman and Deal's "reframing organizations") gives the junior administrator-leader a language in which to cast their experience, effective leadership requires that they use those concepts flexibly and subtly to unlock the complex reality of their situation, rather than as labels to be slapped on concrete situations in lieu of analysis.

Learning-by-writing

The above example shows that case writing can be an effective tool in the preparation of future leaders in education. It is especially useful to surface and convert tacit knowledge and assumptions into explicit models and thereby facilitate systemic or "double loop learning". As students construct a narrative of themselves as leaders, they frequently experience powerful changes of their personal narrative

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and mental models. For example, the administrator-in-training who may start out viewing organizational problems as the result of her colleagues' limitations and weaknesses, becomes capable of realizing how she herself has to change in order to offer effective guidance.

By casting and analyzing their administrative experience in the form of case studies, students of educational administration and leadership surface their "tacit knowledge" and open it up to critical feedback from peers and mentors. Reconstructing their experience as a "case" de-personalizes a seemingly random flow of events and experience and allows them to gain distance from it. Second, it opens an unstructured and inchoate stream of experience for inspection that is inspired by theoretical postulates and ideas.

Last, but not least, the finished case can also be used in lower level courses, where it will continue the collective conversation of student-practitioners. Table III presents a schematic version of the practical steps.

Implications

This paper describes the use of case writing cum peer review as a tool to develop the practical knowledge of fledgling educational leaders. As such, it might be a candidate for the signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005a) that satisfies many of the characteristics

Background events	Linda's actions	Linda's initial situation reading	Linda's learning	Linda's agenda change
After the long tenure of John Greene, several short-term principals come and go. Meanwhile, there is an increase of minority students, and an exit of white families Teachers complain about lack of discipline Linda encounters "wait and see" attitude		Predominantly white teachers are resisting change (new principal, and more "diverse" student demographics). What teachers see as "lack of discipline" is really their inability to work with a diverse student population	*Single loop* "If I don't assert myself, the teachers will see me as weak"	L's initial agenda: Build a "pro-change" coalition Restructure power Change a toxic culture
Dean Anne in tears Union show of solidarity Anne unilaterally calls police over student misbehavior Site Based Mgt (SBM) Committee insists on independence Union blames Linda for recent problems	Linda asks to see SBM agenda Linda stops meeting with union Linda begins reviving teacher teams Linda fires Anne	Teachers via union and SBM committees have built an alternative power structure they are loath to give up	*Double loop* "I projected my insecurity onto the staff and failed to put myself in their shoes. I defined the situation as power-struggle between progress and reaction"	L's new agenda Assure teachers Validate their concerns Listen!

Table III.
A principal's change from single to double loop learning

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of an effective pedagogy he described. Making case writing a routine part of student-practitioners' learning would mean that reflection-in-action becomes habitual for them, too. Students would have to explain themselves in front of their peers and mentors who would question their decisions and assessments, requiring both collaboration and improvisation. The need to scrutinize their past and present work for case study worthy event makes student-practitioners accountable for their work on the job and in the classroom and makes them and their thought processes visible, another of Shulman's characteristics. At the same time, the method is flexible enough to be adapted for use in single courses or across an entire curriculum.

Obviously, case writing cannot be the only pedagogy in education leadership preparation. A broad discussion and documented experimentation with different methods will be needed to gauge its viability. However, this kind of exploration and innovation is unlikely to take place if the culture of our field remains lopsidedly tied to research and traditional scholarship. Despite recent initiatives to upgrade the role of practical knowledge, the learning culture of the field – as displayed in our leading journals, conferences, and university programs – is still dominated by traditional academic scholarship and research. Despite many innovative ideas that scholars and practitioners have produced during the last decade, the practitioner-oriented leadership training is still largely limited to sprinklings of internships in otherwise traditional academic curricula.

If it is true that much of an administrator's day-to-day decision making is driven not by formal theory but by their practical knowledge or experience (Cunliffe, 2002; Daley, 1999; Hager, 2000), then our leading journals ought to publish good case studies, and invite peers to review them. In our view, it is not enough to refer to specialized outlets which publish case studies or action research, for this practice embodies the very gap we are trying to narrow. Likewise, our training programs ought to hone that knowledge by making case writing a part of the curriculum (see Black and Murtadha, 2007), perhaps even a required one. The practical knowledge from which judgment derives can and should be informed by theoretical or technical knowledge, but it cannot be reduced to it. What we need are tools that serve to advance that knowledge, including a leader's self-knowledge.

In the illustrative case presented here, Linda entered her new assignment with a strong belief – developed through her coursework – in the importance of organizational culture. Processing the events of the first few weeks on her job, she soon zeroed in on a diagnosis of a "toxic culture" that turned out to be one-sided. Had she stuck to her plan of action, her first year on the job would likely have been significantly less effective. Instead, case writing provided her with a framework for reflection-in-action. Coupled with critique by the aspiring leader's peers – her community of practice – case writing provided a tool for reflection and for moving the novice beyond the dualism of scholarship and practice.

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