THE CASE METHOD AS SEEN
FROM DIFFERENT PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Bengt Kjellén
Stockholm University
STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN
University West
UDDEVALLA, SWEDEN

Abstract

When arguing for the validity of the case method, its proponents have to a large extent relied on general beliefs in “activity pedagogy” or the benefits of creating reasonably realistic replicas of actual situations. The evidence for this has often been either based on relatively limited examples or was more or less anecdotal. Attempts to put the method in a pedagogical and theoretical perspective have been relatively rare. This is not surprising in itself, since pedagogy as praxis of teaching and pedagogy as academic discipline often have had rather little in common. In Sweden, education research and teacher training have traditionally been performed at different institutions. The author believes that it is necessary to put the claims of the case method in relation to different views on learning and knowledge, in order to gain more academic acceptance for the method and its practitioners. This paper is intended as an initial effort to outline what such an approach might entail and how the praxis and status of the case method and its practitioners could benefit from a firmer grounding in the pedagogical perspectives of today.

KEY WORDS: Pedagogical perspectives, case teaching, learning, knowledge

INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons for using cases in the first place is the belief that learning takes place as a result of not just doing or thinking, but as a combination of doing (experiencing) and thinking (reflection) [cf. e.g. Kolb]. So let us for a moment not only do case teaching, but also, in line with what we teach, reflect about teaching with cases, e.g. whether it is at all about teaching [e.g cf. Lapierre 2006]!

It is usual to advocate case teaching or the case method from a number of fairly practical notions: it’s more fun, it supports student activity, it brings some vestiges of reality into the classroom etc. However, it is not as common to try to ground the case method and the arguments for it in pedagogical theory or to review it from different pedagogical approaches or practices.

One point of this paper is that this latter activity is also important, in view of why we use cases at all, how we should design our cases and our case teaching, and what we can reasonably expect from our own version of the case method. It is also a reasonable assumption that it is a fruitful way of establishing case teaching in the mainstream pedagogical discussion and that it will give us a basis to stand on when we move into new modes of delivery.

So the aim of this paper is to begin this review of and reflection about the relationship between the case method and different pedagogical perspectives, with no claims to either completeness or finality.

The approach taken consists of an initial summary of some important aspects of each perspective briefly comparing them to relevant aspects of the case method. The next step is a closer look at learning
environments and assessment, in order to provide a closer link to the actual practice of the case method. Finally, some preliminary conclusions for further research and discussion are drawn.

**PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

A useful typology of pedagogical perspectives can be constructed with the following three categories [e.g. Greeno et al. 1996]:

- behaviourism
- cognitivism
- situationism

In this paper, the focus will be on the latter two perspectives, for the simple reason that the assumptions behind the behaviouristic perspective, such as the link between stimulus and response in learning and that knowledge is universal and easily transferred, are difficult to reconcile with any form of case pedagogy.

It should be noted that what is called cognitivism is often or even usually referred to as constructivism; however, the term used here enables a distinction between individual constructions of learning and knowledge on one hand and social or collective constructions on the other hand. This latter aspect is covered by situationism (sometimes also referred to as the socio-cultural perspective).

Finally, someone may wonder why the term “perspective” is used, rather than “theory”. One reason is that this avoids going into too much of detailed definitions and clarification of concepts, another that it is a reasonable view of the field that it, to a large extent, consists of just that: diverse perspectives that “collect” a number of similar, but slightly different views, rather than completely distinct and rigorous theory.

Some different aspects of these perspectives that are of interest here are:

- epistemology
- purpose or interest
- its view of learning
- the role of the teacher

In the interest of brevity and readability, the interpretation of the two perspectives in question is summarised in the following table [e.g. Greeno et al. 1996, Packer & Goicoechea 2000].

**TABLE 1**

**SUMMARY OF PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic assumptions</th>
<th>Cognitivism</th>
<th>Situationism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontology</td>
<td>Realism</td>
<td>Social constructionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology</td>
<td>Rationalism</td>
<td>Pragmatism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Structures of information (patterns of symbols)</td>
<td>Distributed between individuals, practices and artefacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Active construction of these informational structures</td>
<td>Interaction between individuals and collective resources, changed/deepened participation in social practices (through socialisation or appropriation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer of knowledge</td>
<td>Unproblematic, built into the process of adaptation</td>
<td>Problematic, not given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principles for Teaching</td>
<td>Self directed exploration of the world, students' own construction better than passive transfer, learning environments that afford different interests, styles of learning and levels of maturity</td>
<td>Mediation through physical and intellectual tools, participation in practices where knowledge is “alive”, realistic situations to be preferred</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Demonstrated ability to learn, e.g. through assimilation and accommodation</th>
<th>Demonstrated ability to function in a social practice, tests with access to artefacts (realistic situations)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus of interest</td>
<td>Man’s cognitive equipment, thinking as independent of social or cultural environment</td>
<td>Collective contexts, learning as mediated by different types of tools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since this is a somewhat condensed way of describing the perspectives, some of the dimensions in the table merit further discussion, while others are more self-explanatory.

**KNOWLEDGE**

To begin with, there are several possible definitions of social constructivism. Here it is taken to mean that there is a material world with an objective existence, but that our perception of it is mediated through language and collectively constructed representations [see e.g. Barlebo Wenneberg 2001].

In the situationist (or sociocultural) perspective, knowledge is not taken to exist as such, but is socially constructed and also embedded in different kinds of tools or artefacts. For ease of comparison, knowledge in this context is taken to mean an ability to participate in social practices, so that it can be defined as an awareness of and capacity to apply collective rules for, e.g., behaviour and problem solving.

**TRANSFER**

The meaning of the concept in this connection is primarily of transfer between different situations or problems, i.e., to be able to apply what originally has been learned in one specific situation or context to other contexts. More precisely, it is something more and different from applying a method or model to other similar problems or examples.

Since cognitivism holds that learning is a process of adaptation, where new knowledge is either assimilated into existing cognitive schemata or leads to a change in these schemata (accommodation), transfer should be an integral part of the learning process and as such unproblematic, as seen from this perspective.

For situationism on the other hand, transfer is not a matter of course. If one regards knowledge as situated in a certain social practice, with its own idiosyncratic rules for how to act in different situations, then knowledge probably is transferable between situations and problems within this practice. This also means that it is not self-evident that it can be transferred to another, qualitatively different context.

**EVALUATION**

Evaluation is used in the sense of how to ascertain that learning has taken place and that the context is what is sometimes called institutional or organised education. This latter distinction is of less importance from a cognitive viewpoint, but useful, or even necessary, from a situationist one, where the focus to a large extent is on learning in different types of informal settings.

From a situationist perspective, evaluation is understood as establishing whether there is a changed or deeper participation in some social practice, a greater awareness of rules etc. However, one might argue which practice this is in the context of organised education. There is, e.g., a discussion in the literature that focuses on “authentic evaluations”, while we mainly educate our students to become, say, teachers or managers outside of those practices.

Laurillard [2002, e.g. p. 55] makes the distinction between: experience based learning on one hand and on the other, the kind of learning that academic studies are based on. The knowledge that is constructed in an academic environment is of the “second order”, since we do not teach in connection with the real world, but based on representations of it. In this view, the practice that the students participate in is an academic practice, and it is how well they do this that should be evaluated at the end of the course.

In this connection, the discussion in Säljö [2000] regarding “appropriation” and “mastery” is also relevant. To appropriate means to accept and internalise certain skills or concepts, while to master means...
that you only behave as if you have done this. The point, he says, of institutionalised or organised forms of learning is that “they acquaint us with knowledge and skills that we do not meet in our everyday life” [Säljö 2000, p.154. author’s translation]. This point will be brought up again in the concluding discussion.

**THE CASE METHOD AND THE PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

There are, of course, various models or definitions of what constitutes the case method. For this paper, not only considering the case as such is of interest, but also the way it is used, or the process, as it were. This means that the discussion starts from a view of the case method that includes:

- the case itself, whether written or presented in some other way, as a more or less edited description of a real situation;
- the case assignment, e.g. the instructions given to the students regarding how they should proceed, what kind of contribution that is expected of them etc.;
- the preparations, whether done individually or in small groups;
- the case seminar where proposed solutions to the case are presented and the case discussed;
- the review of the learning process, which may be done as part of the seminar or as a concluding assignment.

From a brief look at Table 1, it seems fairly obvious that one can argue for the case method, both from a cognitivist and a situationist perspective, at least as a first order approximation. However, the categories in the table are fairly broad and, therefore, a somewhat closer inspection of both the perspectives and the case method is called for.

In order to bring some structure into the discussion and comparisons, part of a framework regarding “issues of practical conceptualisation” will be used, borrowed from Greeno et.al. [1996 pp. 21-42]. This section will look at “design of learning environments” and the next section at “constructing assessments” and some other aspects of the case method and how they should be implemented in order to “comply” with the pedagogical perspectives. (The third issue is “formulating curricula”. This is important but outside the scope of this paper.)

**COGNITIVIST LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

In this view, the focus is on problem-solving and conceptual understanding and reasoning. The main criterion is that the environment is interactive. This interaction should include both material systems and concepts within the domain studied, as well as social interaction, where the students discuss their understanding of these systems and concepts. One typical example would be different kinds of simulations.

This seems to be well inside the practice of most case teaching, at least if we allow some space for exploring not just solutions, but also which interpretation and relations of concepts that lay behind them. Even so, maybe, a caveat is in order: we should aim for the students to develop their own conceptual schemata, rather than supply them with “ready-mades”, according to our own views (which would equal the passive transfer of Table 1).

**SITUATIONIST LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

In this perspective, the focus is on environments for “learning to participate in social practices of inquiry and sense-making”. Of course, the environment must have social interaction, especially “discourse practice”. The discourse in question should be organised so that the students learn to explain their solutions and ideas, rather than just be focussed on whether the answer is correct or not.

An additional criterion is “support for development of positive epistemic identities”, with the focus on both to utilise and reinforce those existing practices of learning that different (groups of) students already have and to change these practices where necessary.

Examples mentioned in Greeno et al [1996] are studies of ethnical differences, e.g., to study alone or to form study groups (and encourage the formation of such groups) and studies of our expectations of different groups of students (which subsequent changes if that is necessary).
This latter criterion poses a universal challenge for all teaching that we may not always live up to in the usual order of things. There is, however, nothing in the case method as such that stands in the way of organising and developing, e.g., the case seminars in this direction, maybe with the exception of the fact that we usually talk about case teaching rather than case learning [see e.g. Lapierre 2006].

Here one may also note that Reynolds et al [2004] (in the context of distance education) question the motives for using different forms of cooperation with reference to the benefit of "community", from the viewpoint that different participants always have different backgrounds, reasons for participation etc. They also pose the question what, more precisely, the students are expected to participate in, what freedom of choice they have and who controls the subject of and degree of cooperation. There often is, they maintain, a hidden control from the side of the teacher behind the talk of equality and cooperative learning.

Laurillard [2002] represents a similar view with her "conversational framework", which among other things, emphasises that both the teacher’s and the students’ conceptions must be made explicit and be negotiable.

The conclusion here then is that there is, in this perspective, a need to add some consideration of other aspects of the learning environment to the case method than those that only concern content and delivery.

**THE CASE METHOD AS APPLIED PEDAGOGY**

At this point, it should be fairly clear that in this paper the case method is not just regarded as a mode of delivery, but as a pedagogical perspective in itself or the didactic application of such a perspective. This is also one of the reasons why this whole exercise is seen as necessary and hopefully also fruitful to undertake. However, even a vehicle for teaching and/or learning is formed at least by some implicit pedagogical perspective or “practical theory” and it must also be applied in some (implicit or explicit) pedagogical context.

Therefore, it is still necessary to view the case method from different pedagogical and didactic perspectives, in order to ascertain what the method affords, in connection with the demands that are put upon it in its learning environment.

One of the premises of this paper, deriving from the chosen pedagogical perspectives, is that the teaching methods used in some way should contribute to the students’ construction of knowledge or learning, either individually (even, if of course, it may take place in a collective context) or collectively. The question here, then, is twofold: can we with reasonable certainty decide that the case method will do this, and how do we ascertain or assess this?

Now, if we take the average teaching note, it usually contains rather specific instructions about the relation between the case and the subject matter, what kind of conclusions the students should be able to draw and what to do if they do not to this as part of their preparation or in the case seminar. This means that the teaching objectives often presuppose what kind of learning that should be constructed as the result of solving the case.

This is not necessarily at odds with the notion that there is not one correct answer to a case assignment; there is a distinction between the case as such and what can be said of the specific situation that is described in it on one hand and on the other the more generally applicable learning that can be the result of solving it.

The conclusion here is that there must be some attention paid, somewhere in the case process, to the kind of constructions that are "erected" by the students, in order to make this part of the learning more explicit. This also means that there must be clearly defined expectations from the teacher, that are focussed less on specific recommendations and more on presenting (or re-presenting) cognitive structures, the meaning of and relation between concepts or phenomena etc.

Following Greeno et al [1996], from a cognitivist viewpoint, this could mean, e.g., to explore what kind of conceptions the students already have and to put forward alternative interpretations. From a situationist point of view, this could, e.g., mean to engage students in a cooperative effort of constructing representations of the field of study, so that the meanings of concepts and symbols become the result of collective research, rather then the prescription of a certain professional language, whether it be academic or taken from another profession.
In either case, it seems necessary to make at least parts of the complete case process more open for alternative interpretations or constructions. This is one reason for including the review of the learning process as one important and integral part of the description of the case method.

CONSTRUCTIONS AND ASSESSMENTS

We know that one of the strongest influences on students’ learning strategies is the way that we assess and grade their performance. We have also, all of us, at some time or other listened to experts, warning us of the negative influence of tests that only contribute to “surface learning”, i.e., a learning style that mainly considers how to pass the test. For many of us, including myself, this is one of the main reasons for using cases, rather than more traditional teaching methods.

The question here is, then, whether we actually do contribute to a deeper form of learning or whether there still might be something missing. From a cognitivist perspective, it might be that we do not pay enough attention to the individual constructions as mentioned before. There is also the time aspect: if we assume that cognitive constructions take time, which is reasonable, do we take this into account so that the assessments cover extended periods of time and not only the case-to-case performance? And if we assume that there are different methods for problem-solving (apart from the professor’s own, of course) and different intellectual styles for “mental work”, which also seems reasonable, do we take this into account in our assessment systems?

From the situationist perspective, how do we assess the ability to “participate in social practices” (not to mention the problem of deciding what these are)? Furthermore, if you are a member of a learning community, one important aspect is to engage in the assessment of the community’s performance; how often do we allow students to actively participate in the formulation of assessment criteria? (It is probably prudent to point out that this is not meant to propose that they should grade themselves, if only for the fact that several attempts in that direction seem to show that they are often more demanding of themselves than their teachers are.)

To sum up: in addition to the attention that is being paid to the presentation of the cases, the formulation of assignments, the delivery or organisation of case seminars etc., it might very well be profitable to rethink the framework of the case experience. This seems especially important in consideration of including deeper learning structures into the intended learning outcomes and of more varied assessment systems.

CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary conclusions from this effort to ground the case method in a pedagogical and didactic perspective are of course not conclusive, nor are they intended to be. However, it appears to be a promising avenue for further study and discussion. The comparison with the chosen perspectives shows that it is possible to reconcile them with at least some varieties of the case method and to add some pedagogical depth to the discussions about and argument for the method.

At the same time, it is if not obvious, so at least probable, that further discussion and inquiry into the pedagogical foundation of the case method will yield substantial benefits in the form of new or changed approaches to how we implement the method in different learning environments and, maybe, a critical rethinking of some of the things that we either take for granted or usually not even think about.

One of those things might well be the claim that the case method is a way to “bring reality into the classroom”. When the case teacher acts according to the criteria from the situationist perspective as given by Greeno et.al. [1996], it means among other things that he or she sees to it that

- social interaction is included in the learning environment;
- the discourse is organised so that students learn to explain their ideas and solutions, rather than just ascertain that the answer is “correct”;
- he/she examines their expectations of different groups of students (and change them when necessary);
- the students are allowed to collectively construct representations rather than conform to some given professional jargon that is to be learned;
- he/she tries to introduce interesting, real life problems.
But is this really the same as bringing reality into the classroom and preparing the students for the demands that are placed on them when they leave the university to pursue a professional career? It is, of course, desirable to create a connection between the classroom and situations and phenomena in society, but it is also important to instil a critical attitude towards, e.g., established professional conceptions and practices. This is part of the academic context that the students participate in and should be the basis for any assessment of how well they are doing that.

The situationist perspective raises interesting questions about what really happens when “a piece of reality” is taken out of its original context and brought into the context of the academic case seminar.

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