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Using Case Studies to Help Faculty Navigate Difficult Classroom Moments

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“Hot” or “difficult” classroom moments occur when a student’s provocative comment elevates emotions in the classroom and creates an uncomfortable tension. Faculty typically feel unprepared to address these volatile moments, and faculty developers and department chairs are faced with the challenge of boosting faculty confidence and helping instructors build the skills to navigate these unexpected moments. This article examines how case studies can be used to help instructors anticipate difficult moments, practice potential responses, and learn from the collective wisdom of their colleagues. Two case studies based on difficult moments in service-learning courses are included.

Keywords: case studies, faculty development, college teaching, classroom management, service learning

Faculty are sometimes faced with what are described as “hot moments” in their classes. “Difficult moments,” or “hot moments,” as described by Warren (2000, 2006), are moments in the classroom when the emotions of students and/or faculty escalate to a level that threatens teaching and learning, usually triggered by a comment on a sensitive issue. These difficult moments can take many forms: A white student might comment on how lucky we are to live in a country that has overcome its issues with racism. Or in an economics class where an instructor is discussing the dwindling number of jobs for people under 25 without a bachelor’s degree, a student might offer, “Thankfully most students here at Expensive Private U have on-campus jobs, if they even have to work at all.” In another class, after watching a clip from the movie *Jane Eyre*, a student could mumble, “That’s so gay.” Students and faculty alike can quickly feel offended, causing an uncomfortable, tense moment for the instructor to address. Most faculty have little to no training or preparation

for addressing students’ emotional responses (Vacarr 2001), and these instances happen infrequently enough that most faculty do not have standard, practiced responses. Faculty developers and department chairs are challenged to equip faculty with the skills to navigate these moments. This article examines why faculty need support to handle these “hot moments” and how case studies can be used effectively to meet that need.

Difficult Moments

How often do these difficult or hot moments occur? It is difficult to determine. Some faculty may teach for several years without experiencing (or perhaps noticing) such a difficult moment. Faculty who teach courses that address topics such as race, religion, social class, and politics might encounter these moments more often than their colleagues who do not touch upon these potential trigger points. But like other classroom disturbances or incivilities, as they are referred to by Boice (1996), difficult moments happen more often to women and faculty of color than they do to their white, male counterparts (Alexander-Snow 2004).

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A common response to these types of moments is silence on the part of the faculty member (Warren 2000). Faculty will say nothing for a myriad of reasons: some are afraid they will not be able to control the emotional level of the classroom; others feel it is not their role to challenge students' thinking on a particular issue; and still others fear that responding will lead the class on a tangent and put them behind in their scheduled coursework (Warren 2000; Wilkerson 1992). A few may hope no one heard the comment, but chances are that if the instructor heard it, others in the classroom did as well.

Ignoring a difficult moment by remaining silent is highly problematic for the students in the room (Vacarr 2001). Students who have been hurt, angered, or intimidated by the instigating comment find it hard to re-engage with the class material (Huston and DiPietro 2007). These students are too distracted to pay attention to learn, and the rest of their time in class, at least for that day, is wasted as they churn over the upsetting exchange. Other students will feel less safe in the classroom environment if the professor appears compliant with the remark—everyone looks to the instructor to establish a respectful and safe class environment. Students who feel vulnerable are less likely take risks in discussion or ask questions when they do not understand a concept. Finally, students who contributed hurtful remarks, whether intentionally or in a moment of ignorance, will not learn that such comments are unacceptable in the classroom and might carry that attitude elsewhere (Frederick 1995).

Although there are many compelling reasons for conscientious instructors to respond, faculty often find it stressful to formulate an appropriate response on the spot. Most faculty find they have their own unexpected emotional reaction that they need to manage (Warren 2006). They may be angry, shocked, or offended by what has been said. They are also unsure how to proceed following a difficult moment and default to what they have prepared for the class—when you do not know what to say and you are angered by something that has been said, it is easiest to fall back on those lecture or discussion notes that you prepared in a clearer state of mind. This is especially true if faculty are afraid that their own comment will be perceived as insensitive and increase the tension. Finally, instructors are often afraid of appearing

vulnerable and of losing control over the classroom environment (Vacarr 2001). If students are agitated and the instructor is not accustomed to having strong emotions surface in class, the first reaction is to back away from the tension and return to something predictable. In sum, students need their instructors to address the upsetting incident, but faculty are often unequipped to do so.

Faculty need to be able to navigate these personal road blocks and formulate a response to the difficult moment. One way to develop these skills is to encounter many of these situations over the course of one's career. Boice (1992) studied how new faculty, experienced and inexperienced, adjust in their teaching roles, and found that faculty establish comfort and confidence in the classroom by experiencing various teaching situations and diverse groups of students. In other words, most instructors develop their responses slowly, over time. But even teachers who are comfortable handling these situations are not necessarily good at doing so. If faculty want to begin developing effective strategies sooner and gain confidence more quickly, Boice (1992) reports that it helps to be exposed to alternative teaching strategies and to have a chance to reflect on meaningful teaching scenarios before they occur.

The challenge for faculty developers and for department chairs, then, is to find ways to give faculty practice handling difficult moments—without actually creating them. A case study is one approach with multiple benefits. Case studies depicting a fictionalized account of a real classroom situation can provide a safer environment to begin developing the skills and techniques for handling the very real moments that are likely to occur in their classrooms.

Why Use Case Studies?

Case studies are suitable learning tools for a variety of reasons. First, case studies can be used to simulate experiential learning. Kreber (2001) analyzed how case studies simulate Kolb's (1981) experiential learning cycle. Stage four, active experimentation, happens outside the case study discussion when instructors apply new concepts and approaches in their teaching. Table 1 shows the first three of the four stages of Kolb's cycle and illustrates how a case study discussion can

TABLE 1
Case Study Simulation of Kolb's (1981) Experiential Learning Cycle

Stages of Kolb's Learning Cycle	Key Activities at Each Stage	How the Stages are Simulated in a Case Study Discussion
Stage I: Concrete Experience	Involvement in New Experiences	Instructors read the case study and experience a variety of thoughts and emotions, simulating some of the reactions they would experience in an actual classroom situation.
Stage II: Reflective Observation	Observation and Reflection on New Experiences from Multiple Perspectives	Instructors consider their own responses.
Stage III: Abstract Conceptualization	Integration of Observations into New Concepts	Instructors discuss the case with other faculty and analyze their observations in context of new concepts offered by facilitators or other faculty.

be mapped onto each stage. Kreber then went on to suggest that experiential learning is simulated when participants engage in focused problem solving. When the case concerns a difficult classroom moment, problem solving opportunities abound. Instructors can analyze how to reply to the student who made the offending comment without shutting that student down for the rest of the course; how to manage one's own personal reaction to an objectionable comment; or how to gauge when it is most appropriate to table the issue and take time outside of class to think through a response.

Case studies also utilize storytelling as a tool to facilitate learning (McDrury and Alterio 2003). Faculty make sense of the story presented in the case by relating it to their own uncomfortable classroom experiences. Faculty who feel uncertain about how they might react in such a tense environment can gain a sense of familiarity by listening to the stories told by their colleagues in response to the case.

A third benefit of discussing case studies with one's colleagues on campus—particularly cases that bear resemblance to one's own professional experience—is that they empower faculty to take bolder steps than they might ordinarily risk (Norman, Ambrose, and Huston 2006). When faculty recognize that their situation is reflected in a case and they hear what their colleagues have tried in similar circumstances, they feel more confident saying or doing something they have not said or done before. Sometimes faculty need to hear that something worked on their own campus, with “our” own students, to be motivated to confront a situation. And for a topic as sensitive as uncertainty in how to manage a classroom, the personal distance from the case study makes it safer for faculty to ask questions; instructors may not want to relate the full details of their own difficult moments, but they can step into someone else's story and add select “but what if . . .?” details from their own teaching experiences.

Case studies have been used in higher education for quite some time, but their regular appearance in the faculty development literature is relatively recent (e.g., DiPietro and Huston 2009; Boye and Tapp 2009). Silverman and Welty (1996) were among the first to examine case studies for faculty preparation. Over the course of their work, they have written more than twenty cases, similar in style to those used in business education, detailing common dilemmas that college faculty face. These cases are designed to encourage faculty to reflect on how other instructors handled teaching predicaments and construct a new “theory of practice” (24) for their own classrooms. Silverman and Welty (1996) found that discussions of cases were key. Discussion draws out multiple valid concerns, helps people understand the realistic limitations that an instructor might face in the moment, and generates more diverse responses to genuinely complex teaching situations.

From this, cases have been found to be an effective method to facilitate discussions about emotionally charged topics for both students and faculty. Gillespie (2003), the original author of the *Stephanie Clark* case study featured in Silverman

and Welty's (1996) article, wrote about using case studies to teach white students about white privilege. In a case where a student is confronted by her own privilege, Gillespie models how to help students examine the difficult issue of white privilege using a story about another person. Cases have also been used with faculty to create a safe venue to discuss departmental politics, poor or unequal treatment of junior faculty, and the sense of isolation that faculty feel at different stages of their career (Norman et al. 2006). By providing distance, a case reduces the defensive feelings and reactions that sensitive topics often evoke.

Using Case Studies in Faculty Development Workshops

Given case studies' potential to help faculty practice handling difficult moments more effectively, the teaching center on our campus embarked on a case writing project. The teaching center collaborated with the Center for Service on campus to write three case studies about difficult moments. The Center for Service supports service-learning initiatives for faculty and students. Service-learning is a pedagogical method that integrates service to the community with instruction and reflection, aimed at fostering students' sense of civic responsibility and their understanding of community needs (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse 2008). Although difficult moments can occur in any kind of course, service-learning courses are ripe for conflict. Working in the community can lead students to make provocative comments in class because they are interacting with unfamiliar, often disadvantaged groups, and students' biases and prejudices quickly surface. The collaboration between the two offices enabled us to draw upon real faculty and student stories and typical teaching concerns. We included one of the three cases as an appendix—the case from our first workshop, which involves a student's ignorant comment about race. The other two cases, one on gender and one on students' self-righteousness, can be furnished by request. Our cases differed from those produced by Silverman and Welty (1996) in that ours were written from a second-person perspective rather than third-person. We intentionally wanted faculty to picture themselves in someone else's situation, rather than examine the situation as an outsider.

Once the cases were written, we organized a series of faculty workshops. As we developed the cases, our goal was to provide a forum where faculty could

1. identify difficult moments they may have had in their own teaching experience;
2. realize that they are not alone if they have found it hard to respond to a difficult moment;
3. learn pre-emptive strategies and well-crafted responses from each other and from the literature; and
4. evaluate how different responses can lead to a variety of unintended consequences.

Each workshop was focused on a different “hot” topic (i.e. race, gender, or students’ self-righteousness), and one case was featured in each workshop. We offered the workshops over lunch, and tables were arranged in groups of three to four to facilitate both small-group discussion and larger-group sharing. Once faculty had time to get settled and eat lunch, the workshop began.

After everyone had introduced themselves, we started each session by establishing the framework for our conversation. Our greatest concern in this setting was participants’ feeling of safety, so we proposed ground rules for discussion. The initial set of ground rules were formulated in advance, but we also opened the floor to suggestions from faculty for other agreements that would maximize their willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue. Once the ground rules were decided upon, we distributed the first part of the case study.

Each case study was written in two parts: the first part provided the context of the case leading to the difficult moment, and the second described the subsequent reaction of one or more students in the classroom and was designed to complicate the situation. Participants read and discussed the first part in their small groups, and then facilitators distributed the second half. We learned after our first workshop that faculty needed a significant amount of time to discuss the second part of the case, because although it took less time to read than the first, it was more provocative and led to more lively discussion. In the last 20–25 minutes, we brought everyone back together to share common themes from their small-group discussions and to provide resources and strategies for responding to difficult moments.

Workshop Assessment

To evaluate our “Teachable Moments” series, we used our standard workshop evaluation form that is distributed in the last five minutes of the workshop. Since we received high positive numbers on the Likert-scale component of these forms (an average of 4.7 out of 5 on all questions), we used faculty comments as our primary method to assess which aspects were useful and which needed improvement. Faculty commented that the small- and large-group discussions were the most helpful feature of the workshops. The discussions allowed them to learn strategies from instructors in other disciplines. Faculty also reported they acquired new techniques they could use in their classes. Attendees from the race workshop commented specifically on how helpful it was to have a safe place to discuss the complexities of race and teaching. Faculty made very few suggestions for improving the workshops except to offer more time for discussing the case, particularly as a large group. (The only other suggestion was to adjust the balance of time between the first and second part of the case, an adjustment that proved successful in our second and third workshops).

In the last week of the term, several weeks after each workshop, we conducted a short follow-up survey to learn

the longer-term impact of participating in one of the case study workshops (response rate = 53% or 17/32). Fifty-three percent of respondents indicated that they had “tried a new teaching technique as a result of the ‘difficult moments’ workshop,” 47% “gained confidence or felt encouraged,” and another 47% “gained an understanding of why a particular approach does/does not work.” Of those who tried a new teaching technique, 78% “changed how I lecture or present information,” 56% “introduced new class policies,” and 44% “implemented techniques to make the class more inclusive.” Keeping in mind that these follow-up surveys were done before the end of the term, what’s most striking about this data is that so many faculty made changes immediately, in the middle of the term, rather than waiting to incorporate these class policies or presentation strategies into a later course. One interpretation is that participants were engaged in experiential learning, as captured by Kolb’s (1981) learning cycle. Approximately half of the respondents tried new teaching techniques within a few weeks of the workshop, which fits Kolb’s active experimentation stage, and the other 47% reported a better understanding of teaching and learning, which maps onto Kolb’s abstract conceptualization stage (See Table 1).

Furthermore, some faculty reported changes in students’ behavior or learning as a result of the workshop. Of those instructors who modified their lecture style or revised class policies, 42% reported that they had already seen improvements in their classroom dynamics or in students’ written work, as captured in the quotes below.

- “It appears that they [the students] feel it is a “safer” environment and can share their insights more freely.”
- “I found that establishing explicit ground rules for a discussion of religious conflict reduced the likelihood of offensive remarks and personal attacks on religious groups or individuals.”
- “Student exchanges in class and on assignments [are] at a higher level of reflection.”
- “Students are more engaged in my class than in the past.”
- “[Students are] more receptive to learning, more committed to understanding things that are not clear.”

It is convenient to measure the success of a workshop in terms of the number of faculty participants or the ratings on a satisfaction survey, but our ultimate goal as faculty developers is to enhance student learning. Comments such as these, even though they only represent five of the 32 participants, affirm that using case studies with faculty provides one way to achieve that goal immediately.

Limitations and Recommendations

Although case studies prompt lively and useful discussion, they do have their limitations. The first limitation is that a case study cannot represent all issues or experiences related to a sensitive topic. Case studies provide a rich context for discussion because they focus on specific details, but the inclusion

of those details means the case will differ from most people's experiences. Faculty might focus on the differences between the details of their courses and the scenario presented in the case. For example, the fact that an instructor only teaches a class once a week might increase the sense of urgency to respond immediately rather than waiting until the next class.

A second limitation is that the quality of the discussion depends on the group dynamics of the participants. Just as group dynamics play a role in the effectiveness of teaching strategies in the classroom, sometimes a given group of faculty will not engage with the case in the way the facilitators expected. Facilitators need to be skilled and flexible enough to adjust the workshop as dynamics dictate. Another limitation is that these cases were based on experiences on our campus; facilitators need to be familiar with the faculty and kinds of difficult moments that occur most frequently in their contexts. Different campuses have different cultures; our cases are based on an urban campus and may not work as well in a college town campus setting.

Lastly, these cases are most effective when faculty feel safe enough to discuss their mistakes or gut reactions in a group setting. Ground rules at the start help create a safe environment, but the people in the room also have an impact. If a dean or department chair attends the workshop, the end result might be better leadership on difficult moments, but the other faculty who came ready to participate may get less from the discussion because they might not risk sharing their own difficult experiences.

We propose several recommendations for faculty developers implementing case studies in their work. Our first recommendation comes directly from our "Teachable Moments" experience: case studies work very well in a workshop setting. A stand-alone workshop can utilize a case's potential to simulate experiential learning, and a series of workshops can create an ongoing dialogue that allows faculty to develop a range of potential responses. These workshops also model how case studies enhance learning, which can encourage faculty to use cases as pedagogical tools in their own classes.

Case studies could also be implemented in faculty learning communities, where a group of faculty meets on a regular basis throughout the school year to discuss enhancing their teaching (Cox 2004). Similar to a series of workshops using case studies, these instructors reconvene periodically and build upon their knowledge from previous meetings through different cases.

Another effective use of case studies would be during a new faculty orientation. Organizers of these programs could offer a workshop using one of the case studies for younger faculty who may not have confronted many classroom challenges. Meeting the needs of a wide variety of incoming faculty is always a challenge at new faculty orientations, and experienced faculty at the orientation would have a chance to mentor more junior faculty in the small-group dialogues.

No one wants to face a difficult or hot moment in the classroom. But if faculty can engage in a structured case study

discussion with their colleagues before a hot moment occurs, at least they do not have to face those moments alone and unprepared. By thinking through the intricacies of a hypothetical but realistic situation, faculty are better equipped to handle an insensitive comment and the high levels of emotions that are provoked by it. While every situation is unique, discussing case studies with one's peers builds faculty confidence and contributes to a culture where it is acceptable to discuss moments of classroom vulnerability and uncertainty.

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APPENDIX CASE STUDY: “A TAXING MOMENT”

Part 1

You are a business professor who teaches a discussion-based tax preparation course. For the second year in a row, the course features a service-learning component in which students offer free tax preparation services to low-income families. The one-day program is designed to help students learn the fundamentals of tax preparation by putting their skills to work in a real situation. The 18 students are sophomores and juniors, and most have only filed an “EZ” tax form for themselves. It’s the ninth week of winter quarter, and students have learned about complex tax forms in class, but this will be their first real-world experience filing such forms.

You’ve structured the service-learning experience in the following way: Students go through a 30-minute overview/orientation focused on the day’s agenda before they are sent into the service area—a large room in a local community center where tables and chairs have been set up in clusters. Students work in pairs, one pair for each client. The clients are local residents of varying income levels and racial / ethnic backgrounds who were notified of the free tax preparation services via postcards mailed out from the community center’s city-wide Family Assistance Program. As the instructor and certified CPA, you are available to supervise the process and you review and approve the tax forms for each client before they leave the community center.

On the day of the program, your observations lead you to believe that the experience is proving to be a complete success; students look engaged with their clients and seek your counsel when clients ask questions they cannot answer. The community leader who worked with you to organize the event has expressed sincere and enthusiastic thanks for the students’ time and efforts. You are eager to hear your students’ impressions of the day.

During the next class session, you invite students to share some of their initial reactions to their experience as part of

a service-learning reflection exercise. Several students comment that it was hard because it really mattered and they didn’t want to make any mistakes. One white student, who has a habit of speaking his mind loudly, raises his hand and says, “Maybe it’s not cool to say this, but I didn’t realize that black people try to cheat on their taxes. We had two clients that day and both of them tried to find ways to get deductions that had nothing to do with their situation. We did the right thing though.”

Discussion Questions

1. As the instructor, how might you respond?
2. What would you like to achieve with your response?
3. What would you like to avoid?
4. What kinds of *proactive* measures could you have implemented early in the course or at the beginning of a service-learning experience that might have helped you through this difficult moment?

Part 2

Immediately after this comment is made and before you have a chance to say anything, two or three hands immediately go up and several students murmur to their neighbors, but a Latina student in the front row turns around to look at the first student who made the comment and angrily replies “Excuse me, that comment really offends me. Could you please find another way of saying it?” The white male student defensively shrugs with his hands in the air “What? Was it the word ‘black?’ African-Americans, then. I’m sorry. You people get so agitated.”

Discussion Questions

1. What are your priorities now? What are the obstacles?
2. Is it possible to transform this difficult moment into a learning experience? If so, how might you get there?
3. Have you ever had an experience like this in one of your classes? If so, what did you learn from it?