The Case Method and Urban Engagement
CTL Fellow Final Report

Abigail Fisher Williamson
June 5, 2015

As a CTL Fellow, I developed, implemented, and evaluated a spring 2015, 300-level seminar that incorporated the traditional case method, as well as a community learning component that built upon the insights of the case method.

The Pedagogical Challenge and Proposed Innovation

In our teaching, we are often faced with the challenge of asking students to extrapolate from abstract concepts to concrete examples, in effect applying theory to practice. In introductory American politics courses, for instance, I want students to be able to apply Political Science theories to understanding current events. In upper level Public Policy courses, I want students to be able to apply theories of social interaction amid ethnic diversity to crafting reasonable recommendations to address societal problems. Beyond the social sciences, instructors ask students to apply theory to practice in some forms of textual analysis or in investigating unanticipated findings from laboratory experiments. Across many disciplines, we hope that students will actively practice applying the concepts and theories we teach.

The case method offers one tool to inculcate these skills. In broad strokes, the case method consists of providing students with a narrative that includes information but lacks analysis. Students must determine which theories or concepts to apply in addressing the issues raised (Velenchik 2012). Although it has been used across disciplines, in business and public policy it involves presenting students with a real-life conundrum and placing them in the role of the decision-maker. Identifying a proposed solution requires that students carefully analyze available information, often working in teams. Typically, the case method asks that instructors take a back seat, allowing students to engage with one another, and permitting periods of silence. In effect, students do the talking as they defend their proposal and collaborate to reach deeper insights. Thus, the case study also offers the opportunity to promote student engagement and classroom discussion (Kunselman and Johnson 2004).

In addition to actively engaging students in applying theory to practice, my hope was that the case method could enrich community learning in Hartford. Experience grappling with classroom-based cases might better prepare students to participate in community learning. Locally-focused cases could contextualize what they learn, while engaging them with the advantages of our urban location. I wondered if Hartford community leaders might be interested in presenting "cases" – real life problems they faced – and having students serve as short-term consultants in crafting recommendations to address these problems. At Dartmouth, similar applied learning exercises have grown into a Policy Research Shop, through which undergraduates conduct research and make recommendations at the request of state legislators.

Despite these potential benefits, neither the literature on the case method nor my own experience with the technique was uniformly positive. As a graduate student learning through the case method, I found that students could become lost in a case's minutiae, drawing conclusions that were anecdotal, rather than theoretically informed or more broadly empirically grounded. Similarly, some scholars have criticized the case method for prizing argumentation over analytics (Shugan 2006). As scholars that conduct systematic research, should we be teaching the carefully identified findings of our field or should we be sacrificing classroom time to allow students to grapple with problems in ways that may not be fully informed? With these concerns in mind, I approached my investigation of the case method with some caution. The method is primarily employed in graduate, professional schools. Could it transfer effectively to undergraduates? And, if so, under what circumstances would undergraduates effectively employ the particulars of a case to develop more general understandings?

Implementation and Outcomes

My new course PBPL 351, entitled "Diversity in the City," offered an ideal opportunity to implement the case study method and a related community learning initiative. The course examines how American cities have responded to diverse newcomers over time. Drawing on literatures related to federalism, urban politics, and state and local policy, it considers early twentieth century machine politics, the Great Migration of African-Americans to northern cities, and the dispersion of new immigrant populations since the late 1980s. In analyzing these historical and contemporary phenomena, the course demonstrates the many ways in which race and ethnicity intersect with urban governance. Given these complex topics, I hoped the case method could ground theories of urban politics in real-life examples, bringing to life the varied constituencies and complex constraints facing decision-makers. I also hoped the case method might offer the potential for richer discussions of sensitive issues such as race, ethnicity, and class (Boyd and Halfond 2000).

After an initial unit that introduced theories of federalism and urban governance and examined each historical example, the 18-student seminar used two cases published by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government to discuss performance management initiatives in urban governance or, more broadly, how officials' and residents' incentives shape outcomes in diverse cities. After applying the traditional case method, I then invited three Hartford community leaders to present the students with problems they face, launching four group projects in which students served as short-term consultants in analyzing the problem and crafting recommended solutions.

Employing and Evaluating the Case Method

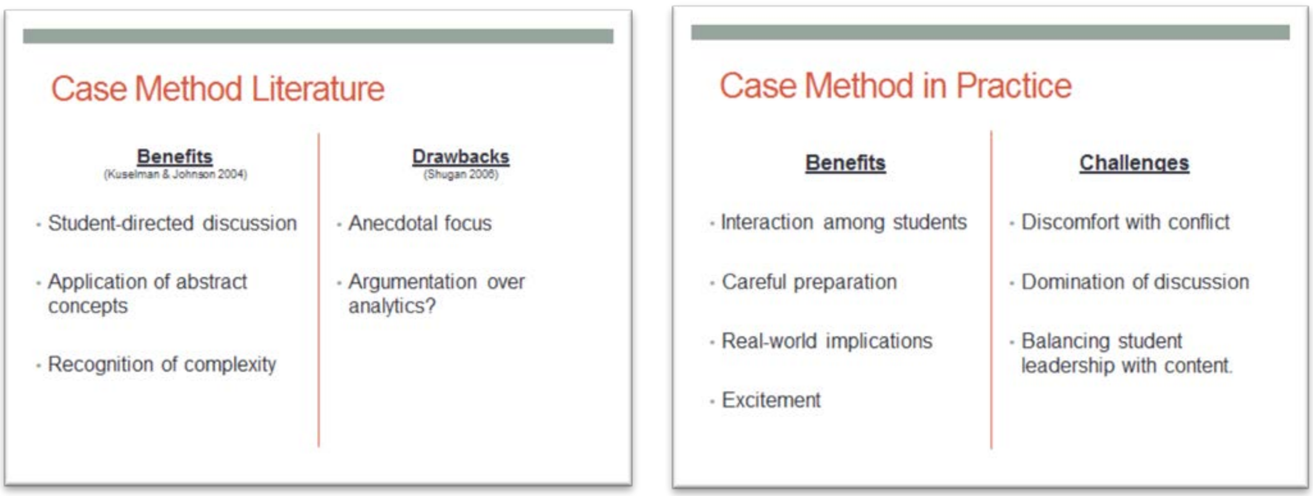
One challenge in employing the case method was identifying cases appropriate to my class topic. While many cases are publicly accessible (http://serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/cases/examples.html) or available for purchase (https://cb.hbsp.harvard.edu/cbmp/pages/content/cases), I found that the topics of existing cases were tailored to graduate business and policy curricula. Thus, while I expect that undergraduate faculty members could find a couple of cases to complement a given course (as I did), it would be difficult to craft a full undergraduate liberal arts course around available cases. Ultimately, I used two cases with similar themes, one of which focused on the implementation of performance management in Washington, DC city government ("Mayor Anthony Williams and Performance Management in DC."), and a second which focused on an attempt to impose performance management on a Chicago welfare-to-work non-profit agency ("The Ladder and the Scale: Commitment and Accountability at Project Match"). Each case allowed students to consider how policy incentives might be structured to promote desired outcomes, while avoiding unintended consequences.

To prepare for these two case discussions, held in consecutive class periods, I talked to students about the goals of the case method and showed them a brief video from Harvard Business School about using the method (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA5R41F7d9Q). Each student was then assigned to write a 3-page case memo on one of the cases, in order to prepare for the discussion. The assignment provided reading questions for all students, as well as a question they were asked to address in the case memo (see Appendix for Case Memo assignment). I used the central question from the case memo to start each case discussion, asking the students to put themselves in the shoes of the decision-maker and make recommendations for how to proceed with using performance management given the information presented in the case. After brainstorming some initial ideas, students began to engage one another in critiquing the ideas and trying to convince classmates of their preferred path forward.

Following the first case discussion, to evaluate the utility of the method, I had students complete a brief, open-ended evaluation. Both I and the students were enthusiastic about the case method's ability to enhance interaction among students, encourage careful preparation, and generate excitement about the real-world implications of the topic. In our case discussions, students built off of one another's comments, with some taking a leadership role in trying to mediate disagreements among the group (e.g. "You guys don't really disagree"). Indeed, seven students praised the degree of interaction among students, writing, for instance, that the case method "gets everyone involved in the discussion and focuses people to push back." Similarly five students enjoyed hearing a "diversity of opinions" from classmates during the discussion. In terms of preparation, though I did not require it, students followed the lead of the Harvard Business School video and met with their peers to discuss the case prior to class. One student reflected, "Preparation is key, so it forces you to read more closely and come with concrete talking points. You need specific references to back up on claims and will be exposed if you can't provide that." Finally, the method seemed to help students see the real implications of the topics discussed in class. Four students reflected this view, with one saying, "You can see the real-word implications of policies and understand that issues are far more complex than what they may seem."

In addition to these positive aspects, I also found some challenges to address in future uses of the case method; namely, finding ways to address some students' domination of discussion, other students' discomfort with conflict, and the need to balance student engagement with substantive content. In the first case discussion, I allowed student discussion to unfurl with relatively little guidance. As a result, 15 of 18 students made at least one comment, 8 were very actively engaged in discussion, but 4 perhaps dominated discussion too much. While students praised the active engagement, four also noted these issues of student domination, with one saying that it was "sometimes harder to get a word in." Two students noted that the discussion format made it particularly hard for those who are not as "vocal and confident." Similarly, although students appreciated the interaction among students, some students expressed discomfort with disagreements among their peers. Four students expressed frustration with feeling "stuck in arguments … rather than coming to a conclusion." The discomfort these students experience in weighing arguments rather than being given a neat conclusion is probably productive for learning. Even so, students have to be prepared for the idea that this discomfort and conflict will be part of the learning process. On a related one, two students expressed frustration that "hearing underdeveloped arguments" meant that the "theory wasn't as fleshed out." In other words, while most enjoyed the engagement and diversity of views, some left class unsure of whether some arguments might be more valid than others. As Figure 1 indicates, our experience of the case method produced results that reflected both the benefits and challenges of using the case method, as discussed in related literature (Kunselman and Johnson 2004, Shugan 2006).

<u>Figure 1. Evaluating the Case Method – Literature and Classroom Findings</u>



<u>The Case Method and Community Engagement</u>

Once students had experience the classroom experience of the case method, I wanted them to apply these skills of grappling with real life challenges to a community learning project in Hartford. To that end, I drew on contacts that Professor Janet Bauer generously provided to reach out to the Hartford Mayor's office, the Asylum Hill Neighborhood Association, and the CT Asian Pacific Affairs Commission. I asked each organization whether they could define a challenge they faced related to incorporating racial and ethnic diversity in Hartford, on which they could use some help from a team of undergraduate short-term consultants. The response from community leaders was enthusiastic, with leaders introducing projects ranging from addressing fraud in immigration legal services to improving the collection of Asian Pacific American healthcare data. After defining an appropriate problem for a student project with me, leaders from each of the organizations came to class for one class period. They presented their problem and students asked questions. Each group of four to five students then wrote a "scope of work" for the project. After 3-4 weeks of intensive primary and secondary research, students presented a 15-minute briefing to the leader, making concrete recommendations for how to address the problem. For their final project, students wrote 8-page individual memos, laying out their own recommendations for how to address the challenge. Figure 2 illustrates the project's steps and the Appendix includes the Community Learning Assignment.

<u>Figure 2. Steps to Community Learning Assignment</u>

On the whole, the project was successful in encouraging students to work together to conduct in-depth research on a relevant question, tailor their findings to convincing a specific audience, and present quality briefings to a local leader. The groups varied in the intensity of their dedication to the research, but three of the four presented really valuable insights, while one addressed the question reasonably. One hurdle was that many students were uncomfortable conducting primary research. The group that was least successful ran into some dead ends in accessing information about local healthcare interpretation, but was too slow to visit the relevant hospital or reach out to relevant employees. Other groups overcame their reticence, but this was a hurdle that warrants further discussion in the future.

Figure 3. Student Presentations to Community Leaders

Many students expressed enthusiasm for the applied exercise, with one writing on the course evaluation, “The Community Learning project made what we were learning practical and it was great to be able to actualize my knowledge.” That said, one unanticipated challenge was that a few students had trouble with the premise of the community leaders’ questions due to the students’ political beliefs. For instance, a student who believes that public funds should not be devoted to interpretation for immigrants might find it difficult to work on a project related to the incorporation of diverse newcomers. I addressed this issue by asking that students treat the community leader as the client for the briefing, operating in response to the client’s premises and concerns. For the individual memo, however, I told students they could make recommendations aligned with their own views. While the students and the community leaders largely found the project rewarding, I offer some recommendations for future use of the case method and case-related community learning below.

Recommendations

As this report indicates, employing the case method and case-related community learning in an upper-level Public Policy seminar succeeded in encouraging students to actively engage with applying theories and concepts from the class to addressing real societal problems. It also succeeded in directing students to tailor recommendations to a specific audience, while considering opposition to their ideas. To improve upon this promising start, I recommend the following for future use of the case method and case-related community learning.

Case Method

1. *"Uncomfortable learning":* Make students more aware that the case method asks them to engage with a problem amid uncertainty and conflicting views and that this discomfort has pedagogical value.
2. *"Discussion Domination":* Allow more time for case discussions to permit quieter voices to heard, for instance allowing time for small group discussions as part of the case discussion. One class period was insufficient for one case.
3. *Balancing Engagement with Content:* Permit more time for discussion of "takeaway points" from the case, first by students and then with greater guidance from the professor. Balance use of the case method with deeper discussion of related readings and theories, so that students walk away with both a sense of the complexity, and a grasp on the field's informed findings.

Case-related Community Learning

1. *Primary Research:* Ensure that students understand at the point of enrollment that the community learning project will require them to conduct primary research, perhaps calling or visiting local agencies. Provide training to students in reaching out in these ways.
2. *Differing Political Views:* Confirm that students are comfortable serving as short-term consultants to city agencies and mainstream non-profit organizations that may have views that differ from their own. Make clear, however, that students will have opportunities to express their own views, as well as taking on the challenge of crafting recommendations for an audience that does not align with their views.
3. *Memo Quality:* Allow time for revision of individual memos. I required that students conduct a "dress rehearsal" of their briefings with me prior to the final briefing. As a result, I was able to catch issues and the briefings were of high quality. If the course structure allowed, it would be ideal to also allow time for revision of memos, so that they were of the highest quality.
4. *Client Relations:* Lastly, it may be worth considering including some sort of disclaimer in providing the short-term research project to the community client. These undergraduate service projects have the potential to be helpful in the sense that they provide a review of articles and other resources – in a sense, peripheral vision for new resources that very few of us have time to review comprehensively from day to day. That said, they must be carefully vetted by those who know the internal workings of the agency and have legal expertise, rather than taken at face value. To avoid misunderstanding, consider ways to make this context clear if products will be shared with clients and potentially disseminated further.

References

Boyd, D.P. and J.A. Halfond. 2000. "Higher Education's Role in the Dialogue on Race." *International Journal of Value-Based Management* 13(1): 35-46.

Harvard Kennedy School. 2002. "Mayor Anthony Williams and Performance Management in DC."

Harvard Kennedy School. 2000. "The Ladder and the Scale: Commitment and Accountability at Project Match."

Kunselman, Julie C. and Kathrine A. Johnson. 2004. "Using the Case Method to Facilitate Learning." *College Teaching* 52(3): 87-92.

Velenchik, Ann. 2012. "Teaching with the Case Method." Accessed 29 March 2014 at http://serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/cases/index.html.

Shugan, Steven M. 2006. "Editorial: Save Research—Abandon the Case Method of Teaching." *Marketing Science* 25(2): 109–115.

Appendix: Assignments

Case Memo Assignment

Write one 3-page memo addressed to the audience described below on the topic indicated. The memo should be double-spaced and written in accordance with the formatting and style instructions provided in class. In addition to the memo assignment, I have listed additional questions to consider while reading.

"Mayor Anthony Williams and Performance Management in DC."
Due Sunday, March 8, 8:00 pm.

Are Mayor Williams' Scorecard Goals enabling Washington, D.C. to achieve the "strategic priorities" listed in paragraph two on page seven? Imagine that Mayor Williams is entering his third year in office. How would you advise him to refine the process associated with developing the goals or refine the goals themselves? Make 1-3 recommendations to Mayor Williams, which you justify drawing on your analysis of evidence from the case. Consider any opposition that Mayor Williams may face in making the changes that you propose and advise the Mayor on how to respond to these concerns.

Additional Reading Questions:

1. Who are the constituencies that Mayor Williams must respond to in designing the Scorecard Goals? What are their interests?
2. Who wins and who loses in Mayor Williams' performance management plans?
3. Choose one agency among those listed on pages 33-37. What is the public value this agency aims to create for the city? To what extent do the scorecard goals support this creation of public value?
4. Carefully review the citywide scorecards presented on pages 33-37. Be prepared to explain (1) one goal that you think produces value for the city of Washington, DC and (2) one goal that you do not believe produces value.

"The Ladder and the Scale: Commitment and Accountability at Project Match."
Due Tuesday, March 10, 8:00 pm.

Project Match received state funding for an additional year without fully addressing Jeanette Tamayo's concerns about demonstrating the organization's impact. Advise Tamayo on how she should handle contracting with Project Match for the following year. Drawing on your analysis of evidence from the case, make 1-3 recommendations to Tamayo on how she should address holding Project Match accountable. Consider opposition that Tamayo will face in implementing her plan and advise her on how to respond.

Additional Reading Questions:

1. What is Toby Herr trying to accomplish? Why?
2. What is Jeanette Tamayo trying to accomplish? Why?
3. What measures of performance does Project Match currently use? What measures of performance do they implement in response to Tamayo's request? Which (if any) of these measures spur Project Match to further its mission?
4. To whom are Tamayo and Herr accountable?
5. In what ways are Tamayo and Herr dependent upon one another?

DIVERSITY IN THE CITY
Public Policy and Law (PBPL) 351

Community Learning Assignment

For this assignment, you will serve as a short-term research consultant to a local leader on a topic relevant to how states, localities, and local institutions make policy in the midst of racial and ethnic diversity. Two to four local leaders will speak to our class at the end of March. In addition to discussing how their work is related to the class topic, they will present a question or problem that they face. You and a group of 4-5 classmates will be assigned to serve as short-term consultants to the leader in addressing this question or problem. At the end of April, you will present a ***group briefing*** to the class and the leader, making recommendations for how best to address the question or problem. You will also submit an ***individual memo*** that offers your recommendations in written form.

This community learning assignment aims to help you contextualize the information and theories we address in class through an applied case of local interest. The goal of community learning is to enrich your understanding of class material while contributing to the surrounding Hartford community.

Briefings
Presented in class on the assigned day. Copy of visual aid (PowerPoint or similar) submitted to Moodle.

In groups of 4-5, students will present a 15 minute briefing responding to the question or problem raised by their assigned local leader. The briefing should advise the leader on a course of action in response to the question or problem s/he raised. The team should use appropriate visual aids (perhaps PowerPoint, or a suitable alternative) and should submit a copy of the visual aids to Moodle for assessment. Throughout the briefing, the team should act as professional, short-term consultants to the assigned leader.

The research process will differ across groups, but students should expect that they will be conducting both primary and secondary research. In terms of primary research, teams will have to gather information from the leader in order to better understand his/her work and the local context. Such primary research could involve interviewing local clients or volunteers. In terms of secondary research, teams will have to gather information on what scholars and practitioners recommend as best practices with respect to the problem at hand. Toward this end, the briefing should cite at least ***fifteen sources***, including ***five policy or scholarly sources***. The briefing should acknowledge all sources of information and images and include a list of sources at the end of the visual presentation.

Following the presentation, the briefing team should be prepared to respond to questions from the policymaker, me, and classmates. Not all briefing team members need to speak during the presentation, but all must contribute to the development of the briefing. To avoid free-riding, after completion of the briefing, each member of the team will confidentially evaluate his/her own performance and the contributions of each of his/her team members.

I will evaluate the briefing based on its argument (presence of clear recommendations, justification using appropriate evidence, and response to policy alternatives) and its clarity of presentation (structure, oral presentation, and visual content). Individual grades will be assigned based on the assessment of the overall briefing (85 percent) and peer assessments (15 percent).

Policy Memo

Memo due April 30 at 4:15 pm to Moodle and to Professor Williamson's mailbox in Downes Memorial (POLS office).

In addition to the group briefing, you will write an individual memo recommending a course of action to your assigned leader.

Instructions:

Sources: In your memo, you must draw on a minimum of ***ten*** relevant sources beyond class readings. These sources are likely to include organizational reports and/or local newspaper articles providing background information, but must also include ***at least five*** scholarly sources or policy reports on the issue that you will address. In other words, in making your recommendations to the leader, you need to draw on some credible information suggesting best practices for addressing the given issue. Pay careful attention to any political bias of the sources you incorporate and orient the leader to this background.

Structure: This assignment takes the form of a policy memo. We will discuss how to write a policy memo in class, including the importance of a clearly delineated structure with distinct sub-sections.

Counterargument: Your analysis should carefully address objections to your recommendations from important constituencies and argue why your recommendations remain valid despite this potential opposition.

Grading:

Please see the syllabus distributed on the first day of class for details on the criteria used in assessing written work. We will discuss in class how terms like "thesis" and "structure" differ in a policy memo as opposed to a typical academic essay.

<u>Steps to Assignment</u>

1. Client Presentations (4/23, 4/25, 4/30). Student responsibilities:
    a. Read the assigned materials and come prepared with questions for the class speaker.
    b. Take careful notes to facilitate writing up your group's scope of work. (You will receive your group assignments on Tuesday, March 24.)

2. Scope of Work (1 per group due 3/31 at 8 pm to Professor Williamson via email; meetings in class on 4/1)
    a. Each group will select one member to write the "scope of work" for their group's project. That student will be responsible for drafting the document and distributing it to the group for comment and revision prior to submission to Professor Williamson. For that student, the scope of work will serve as their second response paper.
    b. The scope of work should consist of the following elements in 3-4 pages:
        i. Research Question: A clear statement of the research question the client seeks to answer.
        ii. Statement of Need: What problem does the client seek to address? Provide relevant facts and figures from the speaker's presentation and/or the readings.
        iii. Client Incentives: To whom is the client accountable with respect to this project? Who are the key stakeholders? Who are the likely sources of opposition?
        iv. Methods: Given the client's needs and interests, how will your group proceed in answering the research question?
        v. Remaining Questions: What key information must your group seek in order to answer the research question? What remaining questions does your group have for the client or for me?

3. Response Papers (for 4/6 or 4/8 classes)
    a. M, 4/6 Class – I will assign two readings – one relevant to Project 1 and one relevant to Project 4. Students in groups 1 and 4 will write a response paper (due Sunday, 4/5 by 8:00 pm [Easter/Passover – plan ahead]). The response paper will critique the reading I assigned relevant to your project, along with one additional source that you choose on your topic. I highly recommend that groups divvy up sources so that each member of your group is reading and writing on a different source, as you continue to develop your knowledge base on the topic.
    b. W, 4/8 Class – Same format. Response paper due by Tuesday, 4/7, 8:00 pm.

4. Presentation Workshops (4/15, 4/20)
    a. W, 4/15, Project 1 and Project 4 will present draft briefing.
    b. M, 4/20, Project 2 and 3 will present draft briefing.

5. Briefings (4/22, 4/27)
    a. W, 4/22, Projects 1 and 4.
    b. M, 4/27, Projects 2 and 3.

6. Individual Memo. Due 4/30, 4:15 pm to Professor Williamson's mailbox and Moodle.