

Case Study Research in Practice

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PROLOGUE

This book is about the theory and practice of case study research. It tells how to construct, conduct and communicate the story of the case that is the subject of the research. ‘Story’ provides an integrating metaphor for the process of case study described in this book and the underlying narrative structure of the case. Every institution or programme has a story to tell about its origin, its development, its achievements at a particular time. Case study documents and interprets the complexity of that experience in its specific socio-political context.

Underlying this account of the process is the story of my experience as a case study researcher in education and related professional fields. I have written with students in mind, inspired by questions they have often asked about case study research and to dispel some myths that have arisen around the practice. Laura, a research student,¹ raised some of these concerns in the following letter.

Dear Helen

I wonder if you can help. I would like to undertake a case study for my thesis. I looked in the university library for good examples. What I found were many MA and PhD theses claiming to have conducted case study research, though it was not always clear what constituted a case study or what the case was. Some appeared to have taken an institution as a case, others an issue or a person. Quite a number had conducted a few interviews and observations in a setting and called it a case study. And several talked about case study as though it was a method in itself. Is this right? There was little evidence of having designed a study and analysed or interpreted the data and few mentioned ethics, which I think is rather important when people feature prominently in a case study.

I have further questions, which also worry my supervisor, concerning the extent to which I can generalize and theorize from the case and how to defend the accusations that case studies are ‘too subjective’ and not useful in policy-making. I am interested in these issues as I hope that my study will make a contribution to policy and practice. But these concerns can wait a little. The immediate help I require is with clarification of the concept, methods, design and analysis. How can I advance a legitimate case for case study that can be conducted with rigour and produce credible findings? Are there any references that would help? And how might I best get started?

Yours sincerely

Laura

Here is my reply.

Dear Laura

Thank you for your letter. The issues you raise are very familiar. Rather than try to squeeze an answer to your queries in a single response to your letter, I have decided to write a book to respond in more depth. Here is a brief outline of the contents.

Early chapters will focus on the concept and purpose of case study, design and methods. Here you will find the reference support you seek for the justification of the approach. The middle chapters will concentrate on the process itself, particularly the study of individuals, the 'self' as the main instrument of data gathering, and how to create and maintain ethical relationships in the field.

Further chapters address analysis and interpretation, reporting and writing in case study. Finally I will return to the issues you have raised on generalizing, theorizing, subjectivity and policy-making, and indicate how you can argue a case for each in the context of case study research.

How does this sound? Will this meet your needs?

*Yours sincerely
Helen*

With Laura's positive response to my outline, I began to write.

Note

- 1 Laura is a fictional student but the questions she raises in this letter are actual questions students have repeatedly asked in case study courses and in conducting a case study thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Concept of Case Study Research

Case study is a study of the singular, the particular, the unique. If you read Katherine Mansfield's short stories (Mansfield, 1987) you have the ideal prototype, in one sense, for case study. Mansfield's descriptions of incidents in everyday life closely resemble the 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) and portrayal of particular events, circumstances and people advocated in case study research. However, there are different forms of case study and different reasons for their use.

My focus is on the evolution and practice of case study research in education and educational evaluation. Case study has a longer history of course. It has antecedents in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, history and psychology and the professions of law and medicine, each of which has developed procedures for establishing the validity of case study for their respective purposes. The affinities with these disciplines are many in terms of methods, such as open-ended interviewing, participant observation and document analysis; and the focus on studying a single case in depth interpreted in a specific socio/cultural/political setting. I acknowledge these shared characteristics while at the same time explore the different procedures and justification for case study that arose in the context of educational research and evaluation in terms of its own logic and purpose.¹

In the literature on case study different authors refer to case study as a method, a strategy, an approach, and not always consistently. I prefer the term 'approach', to indicate that case study has an overarching research intent and methodological (and political?) purpose, which affects what methods are chosen to gather data. 'Method' I reserve for techniques of research, such as interviewing and observing, 'strategy' for the processes (educational and ethical) by which we gain and maintain access to conduct, analyse and interpret the case. However, I recognize that others use these terms differently.

Purpose of Case Study Research

The primary purpose for undertaking a case study is to explore the particularity, the uniqueness, of the single case. Reference may be made to other cases – how else would we know what is unique? – but the essential task is to understand the distinctiveness of the individual case, what Lou Smith (1978) has referred to as a 'bounded system', MacDonald and Walker (1975) as an 'instance in action', and MacDonald³ as an

‘authenticated anecdote’. Each of these descriptors highlights a particular aspect of case study that I explore further in subsequent chapters – first, what is a case and what constitutes the boundary of a case; secondly, the ‘lived experience’ of particular individuals, programmes, projects; and thirdly, the unusual incident or vignette, carefully evidenced and validated, that offers insight into a specific instance or event. The ‘authenticated anecdote’ captures the idiosyncrasy of the particular, the need to provide evidence (an unauthenticated fragment will not do) and the inherent story-telling potential in the case study approach.

Focus of the Case

The case could be a person, a classroom, an institution, a programme, a policy, a system. Opinions differ on whether the net should be cast more widely to include, for example, processes, policies and events. Stake (1995) prefers to see the case as an integrated system focusing on specifics rather than generalities. ‘The case is a specific, a complex, functioning thing’ (p. 2). Merriam (1988: xiv) includes process. I am content with a wider focus to include policies and processes while retaining a commitment to the singularity and uniqueness of the policy or process.⁴ Yin (1994) finds the focus on the specific object (a person or classroom) too broad, as ‘Every study of entities qualifying as objects (e.g., people, organizations, and countries) would then be a case study regardless of the methodology used (e.g., psychological experiment, management survey, economic analysis)’ (p. 17). This differentiates the concept of case study from those who draw their inspirations primarily from qualitative traditions, though Yin does not exclude qualitative methods from a study of the case.

Particular Perspective of Case Study Research

My focus in this book is on qualitative case study to understand the complexity of that ‘instance in action’, ‘bounded system’, or ‘authenticated anecdote’. Subjective data are an integral part of the case. It is through analysis and interpretation of how people think, feel and act that many of the insights and understanding of the case are gained. It acknowledges that you are the main instrument in data gathering, interpretation and reporting. While this is significant in all forms of research, in a single case and with qualitative methods, the ‘self’ is more transparent, and it is important to monitor its impact on the research process and outcome. This is more than noting its inescapable influence in a preface. It is a rigorous exploration of how your values and actions shape data gathering and interpretation and how people and events in the field impact on you. You learn about yourself, in other words, as well as about the case.

Qualitative case study values multiple perspectives of stakeholders and participants, observation in naturally occurring circumstances, and interpretation in context. This is consonant with how I view the world and choose to understand it, that is, through the ways in which participants construct their worlds and how we and they interpret

them. It is also influenced by the need, when I began case study research, to find alternative approaches to evaluating educational programmes to those that were drawn from a positivist, experimental tradition that assumed a different view of reality – one that was constant and could be measured objectively.

Two other perspectives are prominent. The first is the focus on education and the educative process of case study research. Education is the field in which most of the research cited in this book has been based, though examples are also drawn from cases in health and social care that have an educational focus. Education is also an aspiration in the conduct and dissemination of the case. Engagement in case study research should contribute to participants' self-knowledge and to their political knowledge of what it means to work in and between groups. Dissemination to audiences beyond the case allows others to learn from it to inform decision-making, policy and practice. This last aspiration resonates with a point both Merriam (1988: xiii) and Walker (1974: 77) have made in suggesting that qualitative case study is a particularly appropriate methodology for exploring problems of educational practice. Professional practitioners make judgements in concrete circumstances and 'naturally' explore 'instances in action'.

The second is the concept of the 'story of the case', which I alluded to in the Prologue. What I am referring to here, following House (1980),⁵ is how we come to make sense of the case through determining its underlying structure and meaning. There is an ordering and understanding of events that tells a coherent story not in a chronological sense but through an integration of inferences and interpretations of events organized to tell a story of the whole (p. 104). This is not restricted to method – the story can be comprised of metaphors or statistics for example – and it can be implicit or explicit, but in order for implications to be drawn from the case, the story must be there (p. 111). It is also important to distinguish the 'story' from how it is told. Different ways to do this, including the use of documentary, poetic and dramatic forms, are explored in a later chapter.

While my perspective stresses understanding the qualitative nature of experience, it is important to acknowledge that case study research need not use only qualitative methods. Methodology does not define case study, as several authors have pointed out (Adelman et al., 1980; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994), although it shapes the form of a particular study. It is possible to conduct a case study comprised of quantitative data, or from secondary sources as in a historical case study, and with a mix of methods.

The determining factors in deciding whether to use qualitative or quantitative methods are whether they facilitate an understanding of the particular case, what kind of inferences you can make from the data and how these are valued by different audiences for different purposes. The contemporary groundswell of interest in 'mixed methods' research (see, for example, Greene, 2007) addresses these different ways of making inferences from the data and combining/integrating them to inform policy and programme development. While case studies of the kind discussed in this book may be used in mixed method research, I do not pursue this angle here. My interest is the in-depth study of the single case using qualitative methods within a naturalistic paradigm.

How I Began

My story begins over thirty years ago in the late 1960s in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, when case study in the field of educational research had yet to be established. My role, as an educational psychologist, was to advise schools on how to handle adolescents with learning or emotional difficulties. In the district in which I was based, an opportunity arose that changed the course of my professional life. The state of Victoria had recently adopted a new curriculum policy, which required a shift from a state-prescribed curriculum to the creation and implementation of a new integrated curriculum devised entirely by the school itself. I was interested in this development for the autonomy and responsibility it gave students and teachers to learn together and decided to explore how the initiative was interpreted in one particular school. I began to observe, not individual adolescents and their emotional or behavioural problems, but how the school as a whole managed the transition to a new curriculum and what effects it had on the principal, the teachers, the students, and on learning and teaching.

The dominant educational research paradigm at that time was experimental design, positing control groups with which to compare experimental groups in any new programme. Such a methodology was clearly inapplicable here. There were no control groups. The school was developing its own unique curriculum. My task became one of monitoring that development through a close description of how and what they did.

I did not set out to conduct a case study of that school or tell the story of that school's new venture. However, intuitively that is what happened as I watched, listened and documented how teachers planned and taught the new curriculum. I observed classrooms. I talked with teachers and students, alone or in groups, to see what they thought of the new curriculum in practice. I examined school records and any other documentation I could find to learn about the school before the change. These three methods, formally known as observation, interview and document analysis, are three of the major methods used in qualitative case study research.

When I moved to England I was fortunate to be able to continue to explore this way of documenting educational change, as Research Associate on the evaluation team of the Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP) based at the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE), University of East Anglia. The evaluation team was facing a similar problem of how to evaluate a broad aims programme – an innovative and unique curriculum – which was interpreted differently in different schools and for which no existing evaluation approaches were appropriate. The director of the evaluation, Barry MacDonald, decided to 'case' the schools to learn what he could from observing, listening and questioning how the project was played out in the cultures of different institutions. From here, it was a short step to developing the case study approach as a major element in the overall evaluation design. This had several components: a psychometric testing programme, a national survey of uptake of the innovation, and case studies of schools and the local education authorities in which they were located. I was the school case study researcher on the team. (For a full account of the evaluation design see MacDonald, 1971, [1973]).

Building on this experience I went on to conduct further case studies of other innovative programmes in education and health and social care. Several years later I began

to explore the potential of case study for institutional development. This seemed a natural progression. External case study evaluation had shown that innovations were bound to fail if they did not allow for local cultural differences, did not acknowledge teachers and students as interpreters of curriculum, and ignored the politics of the institution. Schools had their own unique cultures that affected how innovations were received and implemented.

From my observations in the ‘case’ school mentioned above and several later cases, it also occurred to me that the qualitative methods of observing, interviewing and documentary analysis could be seen as an extension of the skills teachers use in teaching, when they observe, listen, question and make sense of documents and texts. These were the methods I used when I conducted my first case study. The parallel was obvious. Why should teachers and schools not conduct their own case study research? I decided to explore this avenue and in subsequent years, in addition to conducting external case study research of programmes and policies, provided research training for institutions to tell their own unique stories through case study research.

Concurrent with these developments at the practical level, I began to write about the theory and practice of case study research in education (Simons, 1971, 1981, [1977], 1987, 1996; Humble and Simons, 1978). These publications draw on the experience of conducting case studies and dilemmas encountered along the way. This book continues that practice of trying to capture experientially the theory and practice of case study research.

Structure of the Book

Given this focus, it seemed useful to organize the book in four sections to reflect the process of case study research from start to finish. There is a more complex reality in the doing of course. Chapters are interlinked and issues revisited in places to emphasize that the process is more iterative in practice than a linear structure suggests.

Case study memos throughout summarize essential features of each chapter to act as an aide-memoire for the process in practice. In many places I suggest several ways of reaching the same aim and offer choices to this end. This is deliberate. This is not a textbook to be followed in every detail. There is no right way to do case study research. While my preferences will be evident both in the main text and the memos, there are other decisions you can make. Stay open to what suits you and your research topic.

Section I: Getting Started

When we know *why* we want to conduct a case study, the *how* more easily follows. Chapter 1 examines how and why case study evolved in educational research and evaluation and discusses the concept of case study research that emerged in this context – its strengths and limitations. Chapter 2 explores issues of planning and design, how to gain access to the case and establish field relationships. Chapter 3 focuses on three methods commonly adopted in qualitative case study – interviewing, observing and document analysis – and presents practical guidance for data collection.

Section II: In the Field

Chapter 4, 'Who Are They?', draws attention to the central role of the person in case study research and the need to understand how individuals experience the programme, policy or organization. It suggests different ways of documenting the experience of individuals and the stories they tell. Chapter 5, 'Who Are We?', looks at the other side of the coin. It acknowledges that we are inevitably situated in the contexts we study and explores why case researchers need to be self-reflexive at all stages of the research process. It outlines processes for discovering different aspects of your 'self' in the specific case you are studying and for monitoring your subjectivity. Chapter 6, 'Whose Data Are They?', discusses the ethics of case study research. It presents the case for situated ethics, indicates how to establish and maintain trust in the field and gives examples of dilemmas that indicate the complexity of ethical decision-making in situated practice. Specific protocols are offered to guide ethical practice in the field.

Section III: Making Sense

The title of Chapter 7, 'Begin at the Beginning', reflects the fact that analysis and interpretation start at the outset and continue throughout the research process. It includes strategies for making sense of the data from different theoretical perspectives and a discussion of how to ensure the validity and credibility of your findings. Chapter 8, 'From Data to Story', offers examples of different analytic and interpretative strategies used in actual cases.

Section IV: Telling the Story

'Start at Any Point', the title of Chapter 9, indicates that telling a story of what you have found may have a quite different sequence from the one that led to your analysis and interpretation. It outlines different forms of reporting, including documentary, narrative and journalistic, and explores the boundaries between fiction and ways of telling the story that ensure the authenticity of the research data is retained. It also offers guidance on how to enhance your writing skills. Chapter 10 addresses the issues raised in the initial letter from Laura concerning generalizing, theorizing and policy-making in case study research, through attempting to dispel frequently cited myths around the practice. The Epilogue and final memo summarize key issues in case study research and extend a challenge to Laura and her fellow students to take the story on.

Notes

- 1 Case studies also exist in the fields of management, organizational development and policy studies but these are not my focus here. Nor are case studies generated solely for teaching purposes and which may or may not be based on authentic experience, case precedents, as in law, or individual case reports, as in psychology, social work or medicine.

- 2 Not all case study research has a political purpose. This is a reference to the democratic focus of my case study practice in evaluation and the intent in this context to provide evidence to facilitate decision-making professionally and publicly.
- 3 Personal communication, April 1974.
- 4 See Simons et al. (1998) for a case study of a national policy curriculum initiative.
- 5 In the context of evaluation, House (1980) has advocated that for minimum coherence every evaluation should tell a story. 'There must be either an explicit or tacit sequence of events (or more accurately, an interpretation of events) for the reader to use as a guide to valuing' (p. 102). This coherence extends to the use of imagery, dramatic structures and other aesthetic elements that appeal to emotional as well as cognitive ways of knowing. His argument is that both the story and the aesthetic elements contribute to overall coherence and that greater coherence makes the evaluation report more credible (pp. 104–105).

Section I

GETTING STARTED

