A Case-Study Writing Methodology for the MPA-DP at Columbia University[1]

by

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1. Introduction

The Master in Public Administration in Development Practice (MPA-DP), taught at Columbia University (CU), requires students to develop and implement a long-term field project in a village or site that deploys integrated multi-sectoral approaches to sustainable development (ex: Millennium Villages, BRAC).

Understanding that there are practical skills needed to conduct effective development work that cannot be taught in the classroom, the field project was created to provide students with a structured and guided immersion into a development experience. Working closely with skilled practitioners, community members and faculty mentors, the program focuses on the development of competencies that may be categorized into the following general areas: technical skills, cross-sectoral understanding, communication, community participation and facilitation skills, project management, social and cultural skills.

With these competencies, the MPA-DP field project targets the following core learning outcomes:

- To gain an understanding of the culture, politics, language, and the relevant actors working in the local development context;
- To gain a first-hand understanding of key interconnected sectors of education, agriculture, environment, health, nutrition, energy, infrastructure, water, gender, and community development;
- To demonstrate effective use of project cycle management through problem identification, analysis, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation;
- To integrate knowledge of cross-sectoral issues, local insights and community participation into field training projects and activities;
- To identify effective strategies for a policy intervention to advance sustainable development (at the local, national, or regional level);
- To demonstrate a critical use of self-reflection and inter-personal skills and dynamics to analyze attitudes, perceptions and biases;
- To communicate important achievements and challenges in implementing a multi-sectoral project (through videos, multi-media presentations and project reports).

To summarize, there are basically two components to the long-term field project: **learning and contributing**. We want the students to learn and experience as much as possible of the practice of sustainable development through a "hands-on" approach. But even more importantly we want our

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students to leave a valued contribution towards the advancement of the sites' development needs, priorities and objectives. Case-studies—based on the real-life experiences of students engaged in these field projects—to be disseminated as teaching/learning materials within the MPA-DP program, within SIPA, the global MDP network[3], and the broader global audience of development practitioners will also be produced in paper and video medium.

2. The Long-Term Field Project and the Opportunity for Case-Studies

At Columbia, the long-term field project unfolds throughout four phases: *preparation*, *design*, *implementation* and *dissemination*. Even though the relevant information will be collected mainly throughout the implementation phase the actual writing of the case-study will occur throughout the following fall.

The *preparation* phase is initiated in November with a call for project proposals from the MPA-DP to partnering sites, and it ends in early January when MPA-DP students are informed of the projects available at each site/country. Sites are invited to submit terms of reference for up to five project ideas that both best reflect local needs for sustainable development and issues around which the sites would like the students to work. Preference is given to projects around design, implementation or evaluation of *multi-sector* interventions. Importantly, projects should involve more than one sector.

The *design* phase lasts five months, beginning in early January with the communication to students of the projects available, and ending in late May with the students' departure to the development sites. During these four months students (i) are allocated to projects (3-4 students per site), (ii) initiate communication with site's coordinator towards a joint design of the project, (iii) conduct problem/solution background research and benchmarking on the specific project assigned, (iv) negotiate the best fit between their interests and sites' needs, (v) are briefed on social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of their assigned country, as well as on health and security aspects of their travel, and (vi) propose a final project design to be implemented.

The *implementation* phase - field component - lasts three months, is initiated with the arrival at the development site around June 1st, and it ends with the celebration of the project delivery on site around the third week of August. This delivery should also include a project evaluation component. The summer field experience aims at (i) offering students the possibility to practice the integrated approach to sustainable development, and (ii) offering villages/sites additional highly skilled and motivated resources for the design and development of new projects, the improvement of existing projects, or the assistance in the implementation of ongoing activities. The first ten days of this period are dedicated to sector rotations before beginning the projects. Finally, during this phase, students will engage in consistent recording/documenting of their experiences towards the creation of a case study when they return to Columbia in the fall (see Documentation Methods below).

The *dissemination* phase occurs at Columbia University throughout the fall semester when students prepare paper and video versions of the case-studies based on their experiences, analysis and implementation phase documentation.

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[3] See http://mdp.ei.columbia.edu/?id=home

The remainder of this document focuses on the case-study methodology proposed for the MPA-DP program. This has been prepared in conjunction with the Columbia University Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CNMTL) and Columbia University Case Consortium.

3. Case-Study Methodology: our pedagogical approach

Case-study = plot + teaching notes

Authors:

- The Case texts are written by students; teaching notes are written or supervised by invited scholars from either the MPA-DP program or other SIPA programs. Jointly they co-author and, in some cases, publish the case-study. The case-study methodology here proposed is, thus, embedded within the spirit of collaboration between programs and schools.

- This case-study methodology specifically targets those students who have publication aspirations, students who want to synthesize and disseminate their field work in a teaching format, students who see in story-telling a powerful communication in development practice, and students who look for opportunities to further develop their relationship with faculty.

MPA-DP Curriculum Integration and Case-Study Mentoring Group:

- The case-study cycle unfolds across three semesters: spring (project preparation), summer (project development) and fall (case writing). During this cycle there are three levels of support/guidance to the students:

  o The spring semester "Methods of Development Practice" core course is partly designed to guide students in the preparation of their summer projects;
  o The case-study Mentor Group provides pedagogical orientation for the case-studies series and aims at insuring coherence among cases styles. Each team/country will be paired with a case-study mentor who will supervise the case-study preparation throughout the three semesters;
  o The fall semester "Management for Development Professionals" core course provides further guidance, context and additional tools for the writing of the case.

Case-study reading:

- Each case is a real-life situation that stimulates readers/classroom participants to think through problem-solving methods and possible solutions to actual situations. By researching what constituted challenges to real development professionals in real situations, participants develop a context to better understand their own professional experiences. MPA-DP students will be expected to read exemplary case-studies and incorporate best practices in writing their own field-experience based case-studies.

Case-Study Assumptions:

- Case Study teaching methodologies take as their primary assumption that by studying particulars – be they situations, events, people, place, phenomena – a learner can gain general

understanding that will better prepare him/her to understand and act under similar conditions in the future than would traditional lecture-based teaching methodologies.

- For Robyn (1986) pedagogical utility, conflict-provoking, decision-forcing, generality, brevity and a conclusion are the six critical success factors for a case-study.

Learning Hypotheses:

- The learning hypotheses revolve around what the MPA-DP students can learn from developing teaching material based on their project experiences. Students will:
  - develop a deeper understanding of the process of decision-making in real-world development projects by identifying the critical decision points, how they are affected by and how they affect project stakeholders and policy arenas.
  - broaden their understanding of the same by adopting an approach to analysis that involves identifying critical alternatives to given decisions and projecting alternative outcomes.
  - more deeply embed their process and content knowledge by forming it into teachable (and sometimes narrative) form.
  - by engaging with complex problems and looking at them from a multitude of perspectives, students will emerge with a greater tolerance for diversity and thus, will be more effective as citizens of/actors in the world.

Case Study Creation Process Components:

General Case Writing Goals
The particular methodology focused on here will have MPA-DP students actually creating cases that:

- Can be taught in the classroom
- Approach case-studies as classroom discussion events
- Include narratives that stage the revealing of the content to maximize fertile classroom debate
- Include teaching notes

Writing Models
Each case-study model is viewed as a different narrative structure, and it should be defined by the authors in the fall depending on the type of project undertaken in the field and the type of information collected. Overall, each narrative should unfold within the following general framework:
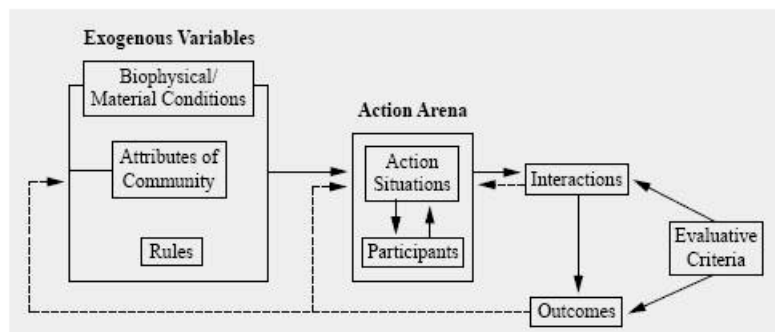
Source: Elinor Ostrom (1990, 2005)

Framework's components and variables can be described as follows:

- Biophysical/Material Conditions: infrastructures, technology, public and private goods and services available.
- Attributes of Community: size, composition, social structure, political system, economic situation, culture.
- Rules: shared understandings by participants about enforced prescriptions concerning what actions (or outcomes) are required, prohibited, or permitted. These are the formal - rules, laws, constitutions -and informal institutions - norms, behavior, conventions.
- Action situation: situations in which two or more actors are faced with a set of potential actions that jointly produce outcomes. Situations are broken down by issues. For example, an environment protection situation may be broken down by issues such as air quality, noise impacts, geologic hazard, visual impact, water quality.
- Participants: number and type of participants, their individual status, and their individual attributes.
- Participants positions: the connecting link between participants and actions (ex: resources, information, interests, social ties); roles to be filled by participants into and out of which participants move (ex: voters, buyers, legislators, patients);
- Potential outcomes: trade-offs, different scenarios and action results. Set of allowable alternative actions and the function that translates actions into realized outcomes.
- Interactions: the control that an individual has in regard to his/her outcome function.
- Evaluative criteria: the information available to participants about actions and outcomes and their linkages. Costs and benefits – which serve as incentives and deterrents – assigned to actions and outcomes.

Lundberg (2011) transforms these variables into a very specific set of questions required to be answered during the preparation of a case-study:

A. A focus
    i) For whom is this case written? (purpose, audience)
    ii) What is the dramatic juncture? (action or end point plus a plausible tension)
B. A framework
    i) Who is the protagonist? (other key actors?)
    ii) What is the journey? (chronology)
C. Which roadblocks will you choose to describe in detail?
    i) what was the problem to which this was the solution?
D. Research: newspapers, magazines, books, websites, scholarly journals, archives, interviews
E. Interview process
    i) Whom must I interview (key players)?
    ii) Whom could I interview (secondary players)
    iii) Who can provide perspective (outside observers)
    iv) Who is opposed to the action taken (critics)?
F. Interview questions
    i) What was the situation at the beginning? Describe in detail.

ii)   What was the situation at the end? Describe in detail.

iii) How did you get there? Describe in detail.

iv)   What happened next?

These variables can be arranged in several possible combinations in order to structure different narrative models:

	Model	Case	Classroom Implementation	Case-study Reference/Example
1	Multi-scenario formulation and decision forcing model	Situation (or critical incident) + context + alternative solutions/approaches.	Discussion on the decision/solution adopted or to be adopted.	Jaipur Rugs: Connecting Rural India to Global Markets[4]
2	Retrospective decision-points (or decision-making) narrative model	Situation (or critical incident) + context + chronology of decision-points and associated alternatives + decisions made	Discussion on the decision process and analysis of trade-offs and cost-benefits	Mount Everest-1996[5]
3	Role play model	Situation (or critical incident) + context + actors + alternatives + trade-offs	Negotiation period by groups + debriefing	The Rockwell Quarry[6]

Model 1 Detail

To the extent that narrative "1" focuses on alternative program interventions it suggests an emphasis on policy priorities and outcomes.

Example: Students arrive to the site/village and after some understanding of the general contextual conditions they identify several development priorities (e.g., nutrition, education, infrastructures). Each policy priority has a different cost-benefit profile associated, which:

• relates to different stakeholders and their interests/preferences/agendas

• aims at different, albeit complementary, policy and development goals

• has a different impact, among other factors/variables that may be associated with each development priority.

Thus, the key Decision Point/Critical Incident question for the first model is: which development priority to address first? "Development priority" is here understood either as a policy or concrete project level.

Model 2 Detail

To the extent that narrative "2" focuses on the decision process around a specific project/intervention it suggests an emphasis on management practices.

Example: With the development priority selected, students have to make a sequence of many decisions towards successful implementation of their project. At each decision-point several possibilities are considered, trade-offs analyzed, consequences assessed, etc., before a decision is made. Each decision made has an impact in the project, leads to a subsequent decision-point, and a new decision-tree is formulated. Project delivery at the end of its implementation (i.e., at the end of the field work)

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[4] Anderson, Henning, Ntiru, Senior and Prahalad (2010). See also www.whartonsp.com/prahalad.

[5] Roberto and Carioggia (2002).

[6] Mitchell, Collins, Bock and Bryan (2003).

may be analyzed vis-à-vis (i) the complete sequence of decision trees, (ii) individual critical decisions, or (iii) decision not taken (i.e., branches of the decision-trees not followed). Analyses of the type "what-if" and short-term vs. long-term impacts of decisions are examples of what this type of case can explore.

Model 3 Detail

To the extent that narrative "3" focuses on conflict resolution and collective action it suggests a focus on participation and governance.

Examples: This type of narrative may be associated either with policy ("1") or management ("2") types of critical incidents. The important nuance in terms of storytelling that distinguishes "3" from the other two is that in this case more is known about each actor's preferences, attitudes, possible reactions, and sensitiveness to policy/project or decision alternatives. In terms of role play in class, part of the information available about each actor is public (i.e., made available for all), part is made available only for the student/group performing that specific role. The focus of narrative "3" is then the attempt of achieving coordinated action among stakeholders towards desired development goals.

Overall a case structure should include at least an introduction, background information, the development of the story, the action and a wrap-up; e.g., epilogue.

Documentation Methods
- Specific Documentation
    - **Initial Situation Description**:
        - Maps to *Biophysical/Material Conditions*, *Community Attributes* and *Rules*
        - Created at the beginning of the Implementation Phase
        - Attributes:
            - Create a report that covers the initial conditions in which the project serves as an intervention
            - List development priorities, stakeholders, current conditions, infrastructure, etc. of the context
            - Categorize and document potential tensions
    - **Participant Profiles**:
        - Maps to *Participants*, *Participants Positions*, *Interactions*, *Evaluative Criteria*
        - Created at the beginning of the Implementation Phase and as needed
        - Identify
    - **Decision Point/Critical Incident Reports**
        - Maps to *Action Situation*
        - Impressions
        - Created as needed.
        - Describe the Action Situation, the participants/stakeholders.
        - Elaborate on all viable solution strategies.
        - Explore each solution strategy in terms of its potential impact on participants/stakeholders and/or policy arenas.
        - Outcomes
            - Document any observable outcomes

Classroom implementation

Because these cases are intended to be run in the classroom, we include a classroom flow here. The general classroom flow should be similar for each of the aforementioned models. For Model #2, there

can be a number of iterations through this flow based on the number of decision points being analyzed. Reveals are not required for each model. For Model #3, the negotiation can be the arena where items 3-7 are teased out.

> **Discussion A** -- *Students discuss the following with the instructor acting as catalyst and moderator*
> 1. What problem does the case address? What is it about?
> 2. Who are the stakeholders, players and participants?
> 3. What are the relevant action and policy arenas affected?
> 4. What are/were the decision options?
> 5. What are the decision criteria?
> 6. What are the relevant facts of the case to be used as evidence to support or attack a decision option?
> 7. Develop hypotheses with credible evidence.
>
> **Discussion B** – *Instructor reveals actual decision made*
> 8. What decision was made? (sometimes doesn't happen in the classroom)
> 9. What was the outcome of the decision?
>
> **Discussion C** -- *Students discuss the following with the instructor acting as catalyst and moderator*
> 10. Evaluate the decision.
> 11. Revisit the original decision options; what does the outcome change, if anything? Are there new options? (In narrative 1, this does not happen.)
>
> **Wrap-up** – *Instructor traces the path of the discussion, highlighting crucial elements*
> 12. Conclusion.

Audiences:

- MPA-DP classes, SIPA classes, MDP Global Network, development practitioners through the publication of a specialized case-study journal.

Teaching Notes:

- According to Austin (1993) teaching notes play five important roles: increase teaching effectiveness, save time, build confidence, guide case writing, and contribute to intellectual capital. Austin provides very useful guidelines for what a teaching note should contain:
  - ○ *Synopsis* – summary of case and its major issues
  - ○ *Learning objectives for teaching the case* – what the author expects students to learn from the case specifically. This is more specific than just general problem-solving and argumentation skills.
  - ○ *Analysis* – This is the heart of the Teaching Note. Analysis involves an exploration of all the critical lenses on the case including a list of key alternatives to the actual outcome.
  - ○ *Teaching Process* – a treatment of how the case is intended to be taught. What are the students supposed to read before the class? What are good guiding questions? How should the case discussion start? What ground should have been covered by the end? How should it end?

4. Case-study Student Workshops: overview

There will be two workshop sessions for MPA-DP students: 1) in the spring, reviewing exemplary case-studies and documentation practices; 2) in the fall, we will go over the final writing process and give tutorials on the case-study online writing tool developed by CNMTL for this initiative.

Moodle Course Title: MDP Field Training 2011 - Columbia University, Course #: FT2011.

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