

### The Group Case Study in Political Science Teaching: A Report

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The political scientist shares a responsibility for political education with his friend the politician. He shies away, however, from "state capitol tours" no matter how well disguised in academic terminology. The college and university-level teacher wishes to make certain that the close relationship between his work in the realm of "practical" political education and the more conventional academic approach is made clear to his students. Whitman College has thus, in recent years, conducted an experiment which combines political education with more conventional academic programs, inaugurating, in 1961-62, a program in which a group of students conduct their own case study research.<sup>1</sup> The collectively researched "group case study" described in this article has developed as the result.

This author has been making use of published case studies as a teaching tool for some twenty years. Convinced of the effectiveness of this educational device, it was natural to wonder why selected students might not be able to learn considerably more by "doing," by writing their own cases, by analyzing events they uncover on their own. This query, plus frustration with previous devices of political education, led to experimentation with student-authored cases. The major advantages are quite obvious. Like political internships, the student has the valuable experience of working cooperatively with political leaders, but the academic instructor is now in control of the situation. Unlike workshops and seminars with public leaders, encounters between student and politician now have clear focus: the student has a specific purpose and a vitality of interest – he knows what he is after. Perhaps most importantly, process is not separated from policy in teaching: the study explores the feelings of need and the social ethics behind a proposal as well as the mechanisms which formulate a proposal to meet those needs.

*The Whitman Experiment.* Whitman political science majors have sometimes chosen to write case studies under the senior thesis program in that department, but the results were by no means always of high quality. When, therefore, the first group of students began collective research on the case of a school budget enacted in the previous session of the state legislature, there was both hopefulness and skepticism in the mind of the instructor. The first year (1961-62) started in a modest way. Only one hour of credit was assigned to the work each semester

and there was a division of labor among the students, each person undertaking part of the task and reporting back to his colleagues. The results were sufficiently encouraging to suggest further experimentation. Since that first trial, a variety of experience has been accumulated, providing lessons as to the most effective means of operating such a collective research project. It was discovered, for one thing, that with undergraduate students, a division of labor in research is seldom effective: it is better to have all of them perform every major function, occasionally dividing the more time-consuming functions among several-member teams. Too great a division of research responsibility results in an unevenness in the work and in the process of reporting to the whole group. This lowers morale at the same time that it damages the quality of the final product. Furthermore, by having each student perform all the tasks for himself, all members of the group are fully informed of the facts and fully appreciative of research problems.

The amount of labor for the student varies with the material studied, but it is generally far in excess of that required in a standard semester-long course. As the program has developed, the importance of thoroughness has been stressed more and more, resulting in increasing student work loads and also in a higher quality of student participation. The course normally begins with analysis of several previously published case studies relevant to the planned case to remind students of the general method. For example, in tax cases students have been assigned cases in which Governors Foster Furcolo and Orville Freeman battled their way through fiscal policy proposals with their legislatures.<sup>2</sup> The next step has been for students to read works of a scholarly nature which relate the case to the wider discipline of political science and provide a frame of reference for the issues in the case. For example, in a case study on the role of British Columbia in the Columbia River waters treaty, students read a number of articles on Canadian politics, a standard text-book on Canadian government, a short book on Canadian-American relations, and several articles on the control of international waterways. While completing such a background study, students begin research to provide a survey of the events, developing a chronology which includes a mass of details from which they will later be able to pick and choose points worthy of discussing in their final report.

2 See J. P. Mallan & George Blackwell, "The Tax that Beat a Governor," in Alan F. Westin (ed.), *The Uses of Power*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1962), pp. 286-322; and Thomas Flinn, *Governor Freeman and the Minnesota Budget*, Inter-University Case Program #60 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961).

1 The author is indebted to the editors of *School and Society* for permission to repeat a few paragraphs from the author's article on this subject in that journal. See the issue of 18 March 1967, pp. 188-191.

Toward the end of the first semester students are required to submit, for grading, an extensive outline including background factors, peripheral issues, a list of major participants, an extensive chronology, and a number of interpretive and factual questions worth investigation during the interview process. When such outlines are completed, the group works together to reach agreement on the story as uncovered in library research, agreeing as to which elements are unclear and as to what facts are missing. The instructor acts as secretary for the group, attempting, on the blackboard, to work out an outline combining the work of the students. Not having performed the research himself, he takes the role of a critical observer, trying to piece together what the students have presented and making certain that he understands the implications. There is inevitable confusion and argument over events and their interpretation, making for lively classroom discussion and provoking stimulating inquiry later on at the interview stage.

A few group interviews with active participants in the case are sometimes held on campus late in the first semester with legislators or others who are familiar with the case. Whitman has an advantage in this respect in that it is on the Washington-Oregon border and in the Columbia River treaty case there were several government officials in Eastern Washington who were involved in negotiations. But the chief interview period usually occurs during the second week of the second semester. Students spend the better part of a week on location, talking with legislators, governors, administrators, journalists, lobbyists, and an occasional political scientist. Frequently this involves visits to more than one city. In the Washington reapportionment case interviews were held in Olympia and Seattle as well as in a small town in which the crucial Supreme Court case of *Thigpen v. Myers* originated. In an Oregon tax case it was necessary to visit a small town newspaper editor who sparked a "tax revolt" campaign. All interviews are conducted in group sessions, normally in the official's own conference room. The system ensures a variety of perspectives: each student is inclined to have a somewhat different direction in his inquiry and yet all have the opportunity of hearing the response. Student questions are usually sharp and penetrating, demonstrating an understanding of the difficulties of public office. Once officials discover the quality of student preparation and the purposefulness of the questions, they become thoroughly cooperative. In the Columbia Treaty case the good reputation of the group of interviewing students was particularly crucial. It appeared to be impossible to arrange an interview with Premier Bennett of British Columbia,

the central figure in the story. The group was told, quite bluntly, by other officials, that no such meeting was likely to be arranged. The Premier failed to answer correspondence, as had been predicted. Several trips to his outer office during the interviewing week resulted in no commitment for a meeting. But, toward the end of the week, having heard about the lively meetings held with other officials, he unexpectedly walked into one of the sessions, sat in the back and listened, then announced that he would see the group that afternoon.

Whenever possible the interview stage is planned for a time when a legislature is in session so that most officials will be present and so that any spare time can be spent in and around legislative chambers. Once this interview stage is completed, usually early in the second semester, students begin work on their final reports. The completion of those reports around the middle of the semester allows the instructor to comment critically on them and permits the students to make final revisions.

*The Learning Experience.* Undergraduates find original research a flattering challenge. One former student traces his decision to enter graduate training in American government to "the excitement generated by seeing months of library research given real substance in the process of interviewing for the case."<sup>3</sup> Students take pride in showing acuteness in their questioning of political leaders. An element of intrigue sometimes adds spice to the work, as, in the 1964-65 case, when the instigator of a referendum movement which succeeded in repealing an Oregon tax law informed the students "in deepest confidence" that his actions had been encouraged by a state official – quite a serious charge if it had proven true. The allegation was categorically denied by the officer involved and by other, more neutral sources, but it did add a note of human interest for the students. In 1965-66 there were denials or statements of "no comment" in the press regarding communications between the Premier of British Columbia and U.S. government officials, talks which would have been a breach of etiquette, since a provincial executive had no business communicating with a foreign power except through his own national government. In that case students were able, through subtle questioning, to discover verifications which made them privy to "off the record" knowledge. In the Washington State reapportionment case the stu-

3 Upon request for this article from the Editor of *P.S.* the author polled a few alumni of the case program but did not have time to communicate with all graduates who have taken part. He is grateful for their help.

# Teaching Notes

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dents enjoyed eliciting facts about a Federal judge's role after he had stated, at the outset, that he could not properly discuss such matters. As one 1969 graduate put it, "the case study gives a focus to the examination of the political process for which there is no ready substitute." "Being well informed," he went on to say, "the students can engage in a meaningful dialogue with key persons directly involved in a policy issue."

Perhaps the most dangerous stereotype in American thinking, from the standpoint of understanding the operations of a democracy, is the misconception that public officials are somehow second-rate people. The collectively-researched case study quickly gives the students an appreciation of the caliber of public officials and the difficulties of their tasks. There is no academic substitute, according to one alumnus of the program, for a living demonstration that "the men who make our laws, while they may in fact be motivated by highest concerns for the public interest or for the interests of their constituents, nevertheless sincerely disagree." Students also achieve an understanding that virtue is by no means limited to members of one political party. The complexity of the processes, even though explained in classroom courses, become more dramatically obvious during the exploration of the cases. Students find that no matter how hard they try, there are always environmental factors which remain unexplored. They see how tangential issues affect the development of a story, becoming convinced that no social event takes place in isolation. When, in the 1963-64 case for example, students discovered that a battle within the Republican delegation in Congress over aid to depressed areas had a direct bearing on the authorization of an electric generating plant at Hanford, Washington, this tangential character of public issues was dramatically demonstrated.<sup>4</sup>

*Evaluation of the Program.* Each of the published cases commonly used in classrooms has particular merits for different teaching objectives. The same may be said of the student-researched case. There is no one criterion for judging "the best." Paradoxically, the one case which has so far been published nationally was perhaps the least effective for the students involved.<sup>5</sup> In large part this was because we could not afford the time or money to make a trip to Washington, D.C. Experience with

eight cases researched so far, however, makes me wonder if the national capitol might not almost be too overwhelming for an effective program of this sort, unless the group were to spend two or three weeks on the scene. The intimacy of Olympia, Salem, or Victoria, in which the scale brings all key participants in close relationship to each other, makes it much simpler to see the whole process. The most successful of the cases may have been the study of the reapportionment in Washington arising out of the Supreme Court rulings of 1962-64. This case involved all branches of government, very intense political and personal battles, technical expertise in district-shaping, a flamboyant use of the judicial power in which the courts actually prohibited the legislature from passing its normal legislation, and fundamental questions of democratic representation. The Columbia Treaty case was undoubtedly the most intriguing. British Columbia politics is an entirely different creature from that in a typical American state; students discovered a strange kind of frontier politics within an ancient parliamentary tradition. The almost automatic use of direct legislation in Oregon tax reform efforts makes its tax policies particularly interesting for case study because students normally have an opportunity to include at least one poll of voter opinion.

A suitable case for such group research must be sufficiently controversial and sufficiently dramatic to have been given full coverage in the public press. In many state legislatures there is little documentary material for student use. Although some documents are always available, major reliance must be on the press. This eliminates many "small" issues which might otherwise be provocative. I have been tempted to assign a local government case but have so far not done so, primarily because the state legislature provides a more diverse source of persons for interviewing. Some legislators inevitably turn out to be unhelpful, but there are always many others who fill the gap. The smaller councils of local government, except perhaps in the very largest of cities, would not seem to present the full arena which is available for major state government issues.

Like any laboratory course, this program is expensive. Too large a group of students increases the chance that weaker students will rely upon their superior colleagues to produce thorough research and sharp and useful questions in the interview process. Ideally the group should not exceed ten, or perhaps twelve, although I have worked with larger groups. There are problems regarding the length of the program. A semester is

4 This case is, to my knowledge, the only one published as a result of the methods described herein. See the author's "Power, Plutonium, and Politics," in R. Tresolini and R. T. Frost, *Cases in American National Government and Politics*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 1-10.  
5 *Ibid.*

too short and a year is sometimes too long. I intend to explore one suggestion, made by alumni of the program, that the students take part in what they like to call "hash sessions," criticizing each other's final report and working toward a publishable combined product. Another suggestion, made by a teaching colleague who joined in one of the interview periods, is to conduct two cases together, giving the students a comparative perspective. But students are already aware of the "tediousness" of research into primary sources (admitting that they benefit from it). To double the research might also require reducing the quality of the essential academic background. Our past solutions have been to use the remainder of the second semester after completion of the case for critical analysis of a book of general interest to political scientists or to engage in a second, shorter project such as having the students develop a syllabus for a new, experimental course.

Students tell me that they reap unexpected benefits from the program. For example, one alumnus points out that "the class is student oriented, allowing each to come to his own conclusions. The teacher cannot be an expert in every case study, so students and teachers work more nearly on an equal plane, learning together." In this respect, the case study is a substitute for the conviviality found in the natural science laboratory. But the chief merit found by the students is in the process of analysis and in the opportunity to do primary research. "The case study," according to one former student who is now in graduate school, "lays bare, removing from the abstraction of the printed page, both what is admirable and what is questionable in the manner in which governmental decisions are made." Another graduate, now practicing with a metropolitan law firm, was particularly impressed by the fact that "students were forced to become sufficiently well informed in a specific topic for them to engage in meaningful dialogue on a basis of near equality with important leaders of political life." "Under what other circumstance could a college student have a fifty minute interview with a governor with the structure of the interview controlled by himself and his friends?" "I was constantly forced," says a former student, "to pick and choose between conflicting versions of what happened, to fill in gaps of information with educated guesses, to make value judgments, to establish priorities, in sum, to think for myself." Not all students will benefit so richly from this program as did those whose remarks are quoted herein, but the fact that some alumni see great value in it long after graduation should inspire further experimentation in such directions.