

# Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations  
across a Range of Genres

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## CHAPTER 15

# FOCUSING ON PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES

### *Case Studies*

*A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. (Yin 2018, 18)*

Case studies are a genre of scholarship that, as our opening quotation indicates, delves deeply into specific examples of learning and teaching practices, usually within a single course, program, or institution. Case studies allow authors to move from anecdotal approaches to more systematic ones. As Lee Shulman (2004, 29) argues: “There is a powerful strategic value in writing and analyzing cases that have been written by members of a case forum, and in systematically exploring the tough question ‘what is this a case of.’” Some learning and teaching journals have specific sections for case studies (e.g., *The Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, *Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*), though they may be called “instructional articles” (*International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*), “practice reports” (*Student Success*), or “classroom notes” (*International Journal of Mathematical Education in Science and Technology*). Several universities and scholarly outlets publish examples of interesting practices in edited volumes or web-based collections. Some case studies are semi-fictionalized to maintain anonymity.

There is a growing interest in *impact case studies* as research-funding bodies demand evidence of impact (Green 2019). In the UK Research

Excellence Framework, 25% of the assessment weighting is given to the reach and significance of impact case studies. “Impacts on students, teaching or other activities both within and beyond the submitting HEI [higher education institution] are **included**” (REF2021 2019, 90); though this was not the case in the 2014 REF when impacts needed to be wider in reach than the submitting higher education institution (Kneale, Cotton, and Miller 2016).

Writing a case study about your practice can be an excellent way to enter the world of publishing about learning and teaching. It can help you build your confidence and begin to develop your identity and voice as a writer. But case studies are as valuable a genre for experienced learning and teaching scholars as they are for inexperienced scholars. They are often more accessible than research articles, and the additional information about context and process usually provided in a case study can be powerful in persuading colleagues to change their practices. In this chapter, we offer a flexible framework to guide the organization and composition of both peer-reviewed and non-refereed case studies, along with discussion of the benefits and complexities of writing in this genre to ensure criticality and the illumination of broader implications. We focus on standalone case studies as opposed to case studies included to illustrate particular practices within other genres, though many of the points we make apply to both.

### **Case Studies of Practice: Critical Analysis to Advance Learning and Teaching Scholarship**

Case studies might sound a bit confusing as a genre because we often think about case studies as a pedagogical approach or a method. Case-based learning is common in business, law, medicine, health-related disciplines, and engineering, where case studies are analyzed to identify problems and propose solutions. This pedagogical approach has also been used in learning and teaching in higher education (Schwartz and Webb 1993). The term “case study” is, moreover, used to describe a research design through which scholars collect and

present data (Tight 2017; Yin 2018). Many publications using this last method would be classified in our empirical research article genre.

In this chapter we are using the term case study to highlight a practice rather than to constitute a method; we use the term to signal a genre of scholarship that delves deeply into the specifics of practice. These pieces of writing tend to be brief, scholarly explorations of specific practices, examples, or initiatives that could either be continuing or one-off projects. Case studies are not always about successful implementations; those about instances where things didn't go according to plan can be at least as useful. Key for both is solid reflection and analysis. Importantly, case studies offer a great deal of context with a strong rationale for the practice being presented. In this sense, you could think of case studies as a way to tell a story about learning and teaching: a story rich in context and focused on the experiences of learners and teachers (see also chapter 20).

As we noted in chapter 11, the boundaries between case studies and some empirical research articles and reflective essays are blurred, and case studies may also appear in blogs. The characteristics of each genre are best seen not as mutually exclusive but rather as overlapping and falling along a continuum. Many scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) research articles, for instance, are constructed around an in-depth analysis of classroom practices. Here we discuss case studies that are generally shorter pieces, based on an analysis of practice and provisional discussion of evidence of impact. The latter might include evaluations based on students' and academics' views, reflections of participants, data on outcomes (e.g., assignments), and adoption of the practice by others.

Some case studies will have the potential to be developed into full research articles with the addition of a robust theoretical or conceptual framework and more refined method. Similarly, the analysis contained in some research articles pertaining to practice in a specific department or institution could be elaborated on in a case study through detailing the context in which it occurred, discussing how it was implemented, and considering what might need to be changed to suit different contexts. Sometimes, the whole of a research article

may be based on one case study (e.g., Marquis et al. 2016), or more than one case study may be compared within a research article (e.g., Hill, Walkington, and King 2018).

Since a case study offers a deep and detailed dive into a specific example of learning and teaching practice, your argument in this genre is built in reference to the particulars of the course, program, or institution combined with evidence of its impact. While your argument might be built through your introduction, literature review, methods, findings, discussion, implications, and conclusion, as in an empirical research article, a case study is likely to be more focused, and the argument will be concentrated on how the findings might or might not be replicated or applicable in other contexts.

In Reflection 15.1, Jessica Riddell discusses the experience of writing a case study on the co-creation of a podcasting course at a Canadian university (Liatsis, Pohl, and Riddell 2018).

### *Reflection 15.1*

#### **The experience of writing a case study**

After reading an article about publishing as the final frontier of students as partners (SaP) (Healey, Healey, and Cliffe 2018), I was inspired to co-publish with students for the first time this past year. After a transformative experience co-creating a course with two student collaborators, we chose to share our experiences in the form of a case study because we felt that the genre was less intimidating and would allow us to include multiple voices and perspectives in our journey of co-creation. Other forms of SoTL—research articles, for example—tend to homogenize voices and unify a journey that felt rather disingenuous. Instead, we wanted to invite into the conversation the challenges and delights that animated our journey. In our paper we set out to engage in critical self-reflection grounded in the relevant SaP literature in an authentic manner that did not efface the contested conceptual terrains we navigated together. The writing and publishing experience was eye-opening: the students demonstrated a level of persistence and

commitment in countless rounds of revisions that exceeded my expectations. As a seasoned writer, but a novice SaP co-author, my initial impulse was to reframe and rewrite the case study, but the genre itself created spaces for me to reflect as a partner rather than as a professor or editor. This opportunity has re-shaped my conception of scholar, learner, and mentor, and I have a newfound appreciation for the case study as an essential component of SoTL.

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This example shows the potential overlap with another category: autoethnography. Although we do not focus on it here, this genre can be understood as spanning case study and reflective essay genres (Deitering, Schroeder, and Stoddart 2017).

### **Writing a Case Study for Publication in a Refereed Journal or as a Book Chapter**

The publication criteria for case studies in *International Journal for Students as Partners (IJSaP)* state:

These publications are brief, scholarly explorations of specific practices, examples or initiatives, including continuing and one-off projects. They discuss the context and rationale for the work, place the case study in the context of the relevant literature, analyze the implementation of the initiative, identify strengths and weaknesses, and offer critical analysis of impacts on students, staff, practice, and policy as appropriate. Case studies do not need to include a theoretical framework or make a significant original contribution to the field, however, purely descriptive case studies are not acceptable (a maximum of 3,000 words). Case studies should include an abstract (150 words).

*Criteria for Review*

- Presents an analysis of the implementation of an initiative
- Contextualizes the initiative through the citation of relevant literature
- Identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the initiative
- Critically analyses impacts on students, staff, practice, and policy as appropriate

*(International Journal for Students as Partners, “Submissions”)*

In writing a case study, whether for a journal article or book chapter, you should provide a rich description of the context, position the practice within the relevant literature, analyze the implementation of the initiative, identify strengths and weaknesses, offer critical analysis of impacts on students and faculty/academics, and call for changes to practice and policy, as appropriate. Case studies advance the learning and teaching conversation through documenting examples of practice, provoking reflection on them, and offering the opportunity for others within the learning and teaching community to adopt them. However, case studies that are descriptive, without analysis or critical reflection, are unlikely to be published in a scholarly journal or book chapter. Our “Guiding Questions for Planning, Revising, and Refining a Case Study” can help you frame case studies and ensure that your writing in this genre is critical and illuminates broader implications. A copy of the questions is [available in the online resources](#). You may find it helpful in planning your case study.

### **Guiding Questions for Planning, Revising, and Refining a Case Study\***

#### **1. What is this a case study of?**

Tell the reader what learning and teaching research and practice areas your case study illustrates. Why should the reader be interested in reading what you have written? For example, the author

quoted below positions her case study in the context of the literature on the research-teaching nexus.

The curriculum design of the new degree course in English launched in 2006–07 was underpinned by modules that aimed to encourage students to engage with scholarship and experience research at first hand. The integration of a research ethos within the English provision mirrored the top right-hand quadrant of the “curriculum design and research-teaching nexus” model . . . proposed by Healey (2005, 70; Healey and Jenkins 2009, 7). (Orsini-Jones 2013, 1)

## **2. Why should your case study matter to other scholars?**

Give the rationale for your case study and explain why it matters. What problem does it address? One book chapter presents a case study of redistributing grades (marks) for a group project between team members with the following justification:

Group projects are often criticised by both staff and students because frequently when they are assessed team members are credited with identical marks. . . . The use of peer and self assessment techniques help to develop skills of responsibility, autonomy, judgement and self-awareness. Knowing that the group marks will be reallocated to reflect the contribution of individuals helps to discourage the “freeloader.” (Healey and Addis 2004, 116)

## **3. What is the context of your case study (e.g., discipline, institution, nation)?**

Give the reader sufficient contextual information to help them interpret your findings. In a case study of preparing obituaries of key geographers in a philosophical module on the development of the discipline, the author stated:

Society, Space and Social Science is a compulsory human geography module at the University of Gloucestershire.

The module aims to place human geography in the wider social sciences as well as provide students with an understanding of the changing nature of geography. Some members of the module teaching team have research interests in the historical development of geography. To this end staff are eager to illustrate to students how research can and does inform teaching and that some research and literature searches can be fascinating and illuminating. (Harrison 2004, 14)

**4. From whose perspective is the case study written? Who was involved in the practice?**

Provide details of the faculty/academic staff, student, and other participants. Whose voices are represented in the case study? For example, a podcasting course from a liberal arts university in Canada

was designed by two student leaders (station managers at the university radio station) in collaboration with a faculty collaborator . . . [and] had an enrolment of 15 undergraduate students from a diverse range of programs. (Liatsis, Pohl, and Riddell 2018, 115–116)

(See also Reflection 15.1.)

**5. What did your practice look like?**

Describe the main features of the educational practice. The Canadian podcast case study discussed

an experiential learning course comprising a 12-episode podcast series dedicated to transformative learning in higher education. . . . Three teams of five students each identified four professors who were particularly effective in facilitating conditions of transformative learning by soliciting feedback via a student survey, interviewing their peers, and examining professors' engagement as educational leaders. (Liatsis, Pohl, and Riddell 2018, 115–116)

## 6. How did you collect evidence about impacts of your practice?

Discuss the sources of evidence of the impacts of your initiative. For instance, the authors of a study that involved the selection and training of two experienced students to be leaders of a Closed Facebook “students-only” community that provided advice and directed queries to appropriate channels stated:

A participatory action research methodology was deployed for the reflective evaluation stage. . . . The two student leaders, facilitators of the Closed Facebook, and four academic project staff members answered the following questions. (Kek et al. 2017, 120)

## 7. What were the outcomes arising from the practice described in your case study?

Identify the change that resulted from the practice. For example, in a study of integrating student peer review into a large, first-year science course, the authors reported that:

The student peer review exercise provided students with the opportunity to reflect on and improve their work prior to submission. Survey results showed 78% of students agreed that peer review developed their ability to give constructive feedback. Training and resources provision for the teaching staff was crucial to the integration of peer review activities. Supported teaching staff were able to engage with and support the students, and the students valued this engagement and guidance. (Dowse, Melvold, and McGrath 2018, 79)

## 8. How do you handle and present unexpected findings?

Unexpected findings can move the conversation about a particular topic in new directions. It is therefore important to explain in what way they are unexpected and what the implications may be for future research. For example, an early study of students and faculty working on a SoTL project together found:

Engaging students in our SoTL project was unexpectedly valuable for the faculty members as researchers. Because we were accountable to our student researchers, we collaborated more diligently than we might have otherwise. . . . We additionally found that our study increased student interest in research mentoring. . . . Students who heard about their peers' involvement in the study expressed interest in becoming future research partners. This was an unanticipated and highly welcome indication that students may have their own compelling motivations for joining us in this kind of work. (Wymer et al. 2012, 6)

### **9. What lessons have you learned, and what will you do differently as a result?**

Reflect on what you have learned and what you would do differently if you were to implement the initiative again.

It was very difficult for students who are barely able to read journal articles in English to enter an equal partnership with lecturers in an Academic Writing course who have published in those journals. In retrospect, it is clear that empowering (disadvantaged) students to be able to articulate their voice in such a partnership required much more time and effort than we realised. (Wijaya Mulya and Aditomo 2020, 60)

### **10. What are the implications for others in different contexts?**

Discuss the impact of your context on your findings and the relevance of your findings to others in different contexts. The Canadian podcast study concluded that:

Four key factors were necessary to turn this from an idea into an academically rigorous credit course:

1) Purpose: We believed that this was an important intervention to ensure the sustainability and relevance of the student-run radio station.

2) Passion: We were committed enough to devote countless hours to this project and students were inspired to engage in this project in meaningful ways.

3) Mentorship: A faculty sponsor, mentor, and champion were essential in the process to design and implement an academically rigorous course.

4) Empowerment: It is essential that a liberal education institution encourage and empower students to go above and beyond in their learning in order to cultivate change in their environments. (Liatsis, Pohl, and Riddell 2018, 120-121)

*\*As with other sets of guiding questions in this book, select those questions that are relevant to your context, add others as appropriate, and decide the order in which you will address them to communicate effectively with your audience.*

Case studies may also appear as chapters of edited collections by institutions or scholarly bodies (e.g., Guest and Lloyd 2013; Healey and Roberts 2004). Since for many authors a case study may be their first publication about learning and teaching, using a set of questions, such as those above, as a guideline can support the development of a writing voice and identity.

### **Writing a Case Study for Publication on a Website or in a Blog**

Most case studies are published not in refereed journals but on institutional websites or in blogs. The [Advance HE Knowledge Hub](#) includes many case studies; a recent collection they published featured case studies on action research (Arnold and Norton 2018). Helen May (2013) provides a short guide to writing case studies for Advance HE. University College London publishes some [lively case study stories](#) demonstrating inspiring teaching practices and projects. [Mick's](#)

**website** features several hundred examples of “mini-case studies,” most of which are brief summaries of interesting practices organized into themes (e.g., engaging students in research and inquiry; students as partners and change agents) with references or contact details, where further information may be found. Some are summarized from published articles or information on websites, and others are written specifically for the collections. Some case studies may be presented as stories (**chapter 20**) or appear in blogs (**chapter 21**).

### **Over to You**

Case studies are an important genre for communicating about your learning and teaching practices and influencing others to enhance their practices. The aim in writing your case study, whether it is less than a single page or several pages long, is to communicate the key details of your practice to colleagues in other departments, institutions, and countries. Therefore, it is important to ensure that you: give readers sufficient information to help them decide whether to adapt your practice or idea to their context; minimize use of discipline-specific terminology; and avoid institutional or discipline-specific acronyms. Because the genre requires both critical reflection on practice and focused analysis in writing, developing the capacity to write case studies can contribute to you becoming a well-rounded and effective learning and teaching scholar. Questions to ask about writing case studies:

- Which of your learning and teaching practices are effective and sufficiently innovative to be of interest to others as a case study? Could these practices be applied in a different disciplinary, institutional, or national context or to a different group of students—age, background, previous experience—than is covered in the literature?
- Which of our Guiding Questions do you think you need to address to write your case study? What other questions are important for you to tackle?
- For what outlets would you consider writing your case study?