

# **GETTING DOWN • TO • CASES**

**Learning to Teach  
with Case Studies**

**SELMA WASSERMANN**

Foreword by C. R. Christensen

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# Foreword

This unique and valuable book, a delight to read, provocative in questions raised and solutions proposed, is clearly must reading for teachers, teachers of teachers, and leaders of academic institutions, from high schools to university professional schools. *Getting Down to Cases: Learning to Teach with Cases Studies*, text and cases, is concerned with the challenge of how teachers can be better prepared in professional programs for the complexities of “real life” in the classroom.

Selma Wassermann brings new insights to old issues. Dissatisfaction with our education system seems to have been with us forever. Emerson, over 150 years ago, carped that we are “shut in schools for ten or fifteen years and come out with a belly full of words and do not know a thing.” In 1915, John Dewey summed the challenge so succinctly when he noted, in *Experience in Education*:

Why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by a passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still so entrenched in practice? That education is not an affair of “telling” and being told, but an active and constructive process, is a principle almost as generally violated in practice as conceded in theory. Is not this deplorable situation due to the fact that the doctrine is itself merely told? It is preached; it is lectured; it is written about. But its enactment into practice requires that the school environment be equipped with agencies for doing, with tools and physical materials, to an extent rarely attained. It requires that methods of instruction and administration be modified to allow and to secure direct and continuous occupations with things.

Dewey’s challenge, repeated by so many others—individual scholars as well as study commissions—remains largely unmet today.

Wassermann, however, in a disciplined and experimental mode, has been working away for over a decade at first-step solutions to Dewey’s basic challenge. Her laboratories have been seminars conducted at the Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, as well as seminal experimental programs conducted at high schools throughout the province, a critical effort being the work done at

secondary schools in Coquitlam and Cowichan school districts in British Columbia. That clinical research, and the resultant programs converting findings into practice, enable her to make a gift of considerable importance to all interested in improving the quality of the teaching-learning process throughout the academy.

What *Getting Down to Cases: Learning to Teach with Case Studies* does is to ask us to consider the adequacy of many, but certainly not all, teacher training programs. Are they preparing the novice teacher to deal with the reality of future classroom practice—how Connie deals with the tensions created by administrative directives conflicting with firmly held personal beliefs? What Barry's teacher might do as she tries to balance ways of helping him to learn math and yet maintain and build his almost nonexistent self-esteem? Or Mrs. Buscemi's difficulty in grading an underprivileged student's work when her evaluation will make the difference as to whether he gains, or does not gain, admission to a local community college? Can the essential attitudes, skills, and process knowledge needed to deal with these classroom problems/opportunities be lectured to—"poured into," to paraphrase Dewey—the preservice instructor? And the author further asks us to reflect on how in-service teachers actually learn on the job—how they deal with the complexities presented by students such as Adam and Barry.

The fundamental theses of this book are simple but powerful. Major improvements are needed in our preservice teacher education programs (implicitly also in in-service programs), and increased use of a case-based, discussion-oriented methodology as a primary, but not exclusive, pedagogical approach offers promise for substantial improvement over current efforts.

Chapter 1, "Shazam! You're a Teacher!" sends a message of concern, as well as hope, to preservice and novice instructors alike. Concerns—there are no neat and tidy "answers," no useful checklist of "solutions" (carefully copied from a principles of teaching textbook) to serve as a "security blanket" for the inevitable challenges and problems you will encounter in your future classroom practice. Much as your current instructors would like to ease your anxiousness about what to do when Jimmy refuses to write up an assigned paper, or when Susie simply won't stop whispering to Joanie, or when the tests don't arrive on time for the English quiz—they can't. It all depends! It depends, Wassermann reminds us, on having "intimate knowledge of the variables, the pushes and pulls and pressures and expectations of the event." It is the specifics of the particular event and the details of the context in which it occurs that govern what responsible action steps might be taken.

But also a message of hope—that teachers, novice and experienced, by mastering the basic clinical skills of observing, questioning, comparing, and intuiting can create personally appropriate ways of thinking about and acting on the problem of the moment. Wassermann labels this process "meaning-making."

“Making meaning of the events in the classroom,” she notes, “is what competent teachers do from moment to moment every teaching day. We size-up a situation, reflect on what it means, and choose an appropriate action that depends on how we have interpreted the event. This is how *we teach ourselves* to understand ‘what is happening; to determine the action to take.’” And teaching with and learning from cases is an excellent way of helping preservice and novice instructors to become competent classroom practitioners—master meaning makers.

Chapter 2, “Hello, Ms. Chips”—Learning to Teach From Cases,” overviews the benefits, and implicitly the risks, of changing from a lecture-knowledge transference mode, to a discussion skill-practice pedagogy. Teaching from cases, the author reminds us, enables a preservice student to increase his or her skills of questioning, listening, observing, and communicating ideas to others; it encourages reflection about “those complex acts known as teaching,” to find ways of understanding how decisions are made in the classroom, to appreciate the complexity of the variables an instructor must consider before she or he chooses what action (if any) to take in the next few seconds; and, so important, it enables him or her to learn more about “self”—one’s own pattern of beliefs and values and how they influence one’s behavior in the classroom. The chapter, moreover, includes a wealth of practical suggestions for helping a preservice teacher to prepare for, and make the most of, a case discussion.

Learning from “Hello, Ms. Chips” does not end when your first re-reading is complete. Re-reading and reflection opens the door to a delightful “discovery”—that most, if not all of the benefits that accrue to the preservice student—the teacher to be—also accrue to the teacher of the moment who is guiding the seminar group through the case problem of the day. The result—a powerful synergism—gradually emerges: discussion leader and student of discussion learning simultaneously, interactively, and cooperatively leads to the almost inevitable outcome, first partnership, then the ultimate—the emergence of a learning community.

Case methods of teaching are increasingly being explored as a possible way of meeting what the philosopher A. N. Whitehead believed to be a major challenge of academia. “First hand knowledge” he noted, “is the ultimate basis of intellectual life. The second handedness of the learned world is the secret of its mediocrity—it is tame because it has never been scared by the facts.” Case methodologies insist that learners, teachers, and students deal with first-hand knowledge—the written case as well as the emergent dialogue—by creating frames of thinking that enable them to apply knowledge to specific problems in a unique context.

I would define a teaching case as a partial, historical, clinical study of a predicament confronting (in this context) a teacher and/or an administrator, presented in a story mode with the “voices” of the key involved parties evident, that

calls for an individual or group to take “action.” A case should be “researched, designed, and crafted,” as Abby J. Hansen reminds us, “to enable and encourage disciplined group dialogue and individual learning.” Cases taught effectively are generative of an abundance of questions, a variety of next step options, and a multiplicity of wider issues that help link the discussion of the hour to prior and future dialogue.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of *Getting Down to Cases* share with the reader a “collection” of 26 cases developed by the author. The cases present a treasure trove of teaching-learning opportunities for all—they are the very best! They are rich in what Jerome Bruner calls “predicaments”—puzzles without neat and simple answers, packed with opportunities for “discovery rather than learning about it,” a case method imperative. Despite inevitable stylistic differences—this “bank” of cases was developed over time, at different institutions, with an objective of exploring a spectrum of teaching challenges—each case will enable you to experience the learning of the whole in the particular; each case will provide you with a contained, bounded teaching instrument that encourages an expansive, even constructively explosive, learning opportunity. We are fortunate to be able to be granted their use.

Wassermann “bundles” her cases around three themes. Chapter 3, “The Teacher as Person,” puts the spotlight on an individual teacher’s “own needs, values, and expectations” and how they impact on her classroom practice. Chapter 4, “Teachers and Students,” focuses on learners—the challenges that emerge when an instructor works with an individual, or groups of students. Chapter 5, “The Teacher and the Curriculum,” examines the wider context of curriculum, instruction, and evaluation.

As one reviews the three modules as a totality, we note that the cases tend to be arrayed from the less complex, for example, Case 3.4, “I’ve Got a Problem,” which highlights difficulties between a student teacher and his college supervisor—a common garden variety problem—to the more complex, for example, Case 5.3, “I’ll Come Back When You’re Teaching,” where one’s teaching plan of the day might end by posing the most fundamental questions of our vocation—who needs to learn, what, and how. The author also supports each case with a thought-provoking assemblage of teaching questions—questions tailored to exploit the special learning opportunities presented by a specific problem. And, as you review and compare all of Wassermann’s carefully designed question sets, again uniformities appear. All are designed to help you strike an appropriate balance between “guiding the discussion” and “imposing lock step control.” All tend to emphasize diagnosis and understanding first with action steps coming later. And many tend to conclude by raising wider issues that have a philosophic, ethical cast.

Another possible use of these cases, one of many, is as the basis for an independent study program. It has been done with success. The cases are so rich



in “firing line detail”—how problems actually emerge in the give and take of classroom dialogue, how colleagues have thought about and worked through sensitive issues—that they inevitably offer new insights to dealing with many current problems. At the minimum, they prepare you to test out new ideas with a buddy over coffee—a much less threatening way of reviewing your proposed next step class experiment than speaking to a large group of colleagues. And, with a bit of luck, it may stimulate you to embark on a modest research effort—to write up a case of your own. Wassermann would be most enthusiastic about such a move.

Chapter 6 urges readers to consider “creating” a case based on a personal classroom experience: It introduces us to four author-colleagues who, having completed such a project, share their experiences with us, and then furnishes us with a detailed set of instructions on how to proceed with such a project. Substantial field experience has demonstrated that this is a powerful learning experience. Why?

First, developing the teaching instrument we call a case, gives one an in-depth appreciation of the intellectual challenge and artistic imperatives inherent in selecting a critical incident, gathering appropriate data, conducting multiple analyses, designing the flow-structure (to use Dr. Abby Hansen’s words) of the case, writing up and reflecting upon multiple drafts, and providing aids for other instructors who might use this material. Completing such a project almost inevitably leaves teachers with increased respect for the case material they use in their daily practice and increased appreciation that a case is an intellectual work of art.

Second, creating one’s own case about a classroom “happening” in which you played a key role enables you to see yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, with greater clarity—sometimes discomfort, sometimes pleasure. Impact comes from reading and re-reading the case. Did *I* do that? Say that to *him*? Wow! Listening then to a group of colleagues bring the power of their collective wisdom to bear on what you actually did in the situation, what you might have done, and what suggestions they might make to you (as a friend and colleague) about your future classroom teaching patterns provides an extraordinary self-learning circumstance.

Finally, in learning more about the complexity and challenges involved in *both* developing case *teaching instruments* as well as in *leading a case dialogue*, one’s already substantial respect for this teaching-learning pedagogy will increase even more. You are onto something great.

Some years ago, Fred Hechinger, education editor of the *New York Times*, commented on the need for change with the academy:

Education is the teachers you remember after you’ve forgotten the others. Changing the way schools are organized and introducing technol-



ogy to provide much of the instruction may increase the chances for serendipity to provide what is missing in schools, but the ultimate reform must come through the person of the teacher.

Wassermann, accepting Hechinger's diagnosis, asks schools of education to reconceive preservice teacher training programs, changing to a discussion pedagogy, and to begin using cases developed around the actual problems faced by instructors in their day-to-day classroom practice. Further, in *Getting Down to Cases*, she provides reader-practitioners with suggestions whereby they may develop their own bank of case materials and modify her format to meet better the needs of a particular school.

Her model, moreover, clearly has implications for the entire academy. We need more effective teachers everywhere in our educational system if we are to meet society's increasingly complex demands. A creative disturber, Wassermann has given us the concepts and materials to meet that challenge. We are in her debt.

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## Preface

"If the situations [in the cases] were drawn from real life and not just concocted from someone's imagination, I believe they would have a lot more meaning," a student critic told me during a field test of some of the cases in this book. It may well be that truth is stranger than fiction. It may be hard to believe that an administration would dismiss a teacher like Connie on such spurious grounds; that a female college supervisor would "come on to" a male student teacher; that a teacher would allow her scantily clad photo to appear in a slick magazine. It may be hard to believe that a child's father could smear his genitals with lye; that a 9-year-old could shoot a classmate; that a teacher would be unable to help a child overcome his math disability. It may be hard to believe that children would resist and reject classroom freedoms; that a principal would usurp a teacher's decision-making prerogatives. In spite of issues in these cases that appear to be "concocted from someone's imagination," the truth is that all the cases are rooted in real events. While names, places, and contexts have been fictionalized to guard and respect the privacy of the individuals involved, all the cases are based in the real world of teachers, children, and schools.

The cases are not intended to present the "unhappy" faces of teaching; they are meant to provide pictures of life in schools, raising issues that beg for enlightened and informed examination. If, through studying these cases, teachers grow in their ability to see beyond the surface and feel ready to deal with deeper, more complex meanings, the cases will have served their purpose.

For their contributions to the case materials, there are many people to thank: Barb Burton, Hugh Blackman, John Richmond, and Brenda McNeill for allowing me to adapt material from their original cases; Michael Manley-Casimir, for the delicious title, "The Bared Breast"; Anita Plaxe and Teresa Saunders for the stories from their classrooms.

Mindy Ally, Maureen Adam, and Harold McAllister conducted numerous interviews that led to cases based upon critical incidents in the lives of beginning teachers. Joan Guido and her staff welcomed me into their school and shared their experiences generously. Steve Smith introduced me to the possibilities of student teachers who write their own cases.

There are others to thank: Lin Langley, Heather Hamilton, and Kelli Vogstead, those intrepid case teachers in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, who tried many of the cases and thus allowed for their “testing in the marketplace”; Linda Muttitt, who agreed to have her journal entry made public; Chris Christensen, for his inspiration and for showing me the joy of teaching and learning with cases; Susan Liddicoat, my good editor; and all my students at Simon Fraser University, who have been my best teachers in my ongoing search for making meaning of the educational process. To all, my deepest gratitude.

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# 1 | Shazam! You're a Teacher!

Mary Dare Hitchcock taught Human Growth and Development, 3 credits, to sophomore students in the university where I was learning to be a teacher. She was a southern lady who spoke in the soft, drawn-out vowel tones of Geo-jah, and the musical cadences of her voice were sweet on my ears. What puzzled me most about her was how she managed to look so cool and unruffled on those beastly hot and humid days that insinuate themselves too early into the East Coast spring, while the rest of us, scraped from the mean streets of the city, were always sweating and grubby. Just looking at her made me feel less like a teacher. Did teachers never sweat? Did they never have a single hair out of place? Were they always as composed, self-assured, untouched by human experience as this teacher's demeanor would have me believe?

From the raised platform where she sat, elevated by position and attitude, she gave my class lessons in teaching. To be remembered, above all, she told us, was that children were different—physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially different from one another. (If we learned the mnemonic P-I-E-S, that would surely help us to remember this important concept for the final exam. Dutifully, we copied P-I-E-S into our notebooks.) And because children are different in P-I-E-S ways, teachers must INDIVIDUALIZE THEIR INSTRUCTION. She spoke the words in capital letters. There could be no other acceptable way to teach.

Teaching to individual learning needs was a foreign idea to those of us who had spent the last twelve years in large, urban public schools, where as many as 35 children in a class were all instructed in exactly the same way, whatever our individual differences. In our school experiences, even going to the toilet was a group activity rather than an individual endeavor. If there were differences among us, they were neither acknowledged nor addressed. But in our desire to please Dr. Hitchcock and, of course, to pass the course, we took to heart what she said without question, without even mentioning the obvious and flagrant discrepancy between what she told us about individual differences and the way she taught. For as our professor sat on her platform, day after blah-blahing day, we

sat, too, in straight rows of tablet armchairs, listening, taking notes, and collecting our 3 credits' worth of human growth and development.

Needless to say, it was easy to learn the lessons in Dr. Hitchcock's class and to pass the course. It did not take much to remember P-I-E-S, and other such concepts, and to write about them with vigor on essays and final exams. Other courses in the education sequence did not vary from this format, in which scholarly professors lectured to students about what was important to know about teaching, and students listened, took notes, and returned, for the teachers' approval, their own words in different form. After 36 hours of education coursework I had amassed a huge repository of facts about teaching, which I fully expected would equip me for the challenges of classroom practice.

It should not come as a surprise that I would remember my first day of teaching as clearly as if I had gone down on the *Titanic*. Learning the "correct answers" had not only *not* equipped me for the complex and confusing world of the classroom, but even worse, had led me down the garden path. Implicit in what I had learned was that teaching was merely a matter of learning certain pieces of information about teaching. If I only knew what the "answers" were, I would be prepared to face the vast and overwhelming human dilemmas that make up life in classrooms. I, unfortunately, had been swindled. My training in learning the answers was as useless as yesterday's pizza. I was entering a profession in which there are few, if any, clear-cut answers, a profession that is riddled with ambiguity and moral dilemmas that would make Solomon weep. Even more of a handicap was that I became desperate in my search for the "answers"—certain that they were out there, somewhere, if only I could find them. So feverish was I in this quest that I was unable to perceive the real needs of the profession: how to use knowledge to deal effectively with the human dilemmas that teachers face from moment to moment on the job. Good teaching, I eventually learned, depends more on how teachers use knowledge to make intelligent meaning of complex classroom events than it does on knowing the "answers." These learned skills—the application of knowledge to practice—had been sadly omitted from my coursework.

Perhaps my education professors had assumed that knowledge, once acquired, would be easily applied to classroom practice, but it does not quite work that way. The application of knowledge to practice is a complex process that requires its own course of study. Aspiring writers who study verbs, adjectives, nouns, grammatical construction, and other language mechanisms will not become writers until they learn how to apply that knowledge to the art and craft of writing. Aspiring teachers who study P-I-E-S, learn that the "slow learner has an IQ range of 75 to 90 and is unable to think in abstractions," and memorize the four definitions of creativity and other fact-bytes from texts and/or lectures will not become teachers until they learn how to use that information intelligently in advancing student learning. The gap between *knowing* and *knowing how* must



be bridged by a whole new set of skills that take the aspiring teacher from the world of information to learned applications.

My own teacher training had prepared me for a TV sitcom world of teaching, an artificial world in which situations are never very complicated and simple answers suffice to deal with whatever problem is dished out. Nothing in that TV sitcom world is ever ambiguous or uncertain. Kids never fall down and bruise their knees. They never poke each other with pencils. They never lose their lunches. They never have runny noses or wet their pants. Parents never make outrageous demands. Principals never intimidate. There are always enough books, chairs, desks, and other instructional materials to go around. Teachers are never tired, frustrated, or angry. There are no incidences of child abuse, no disappeared fathers, no drunken mothers. There are never any children who cannot learn, or will not learn, never any children who are hungry or emotionally ill. And in the TV sitcom land of certainty, there is always enough time for teachers to do everything the job of teaching requires. Should a more complex issue ever surface, not to worry. The matter is always massaged into a tidy little solution in a comfortable 30- or 60-minute package, less 10 or so minutes for commercial breaks.

No wonder my first day of teaching found me fumbling, bumbling, and limping through those five interminable hours of the school day. I was prepared for *The Brady Bunch* and what I got was *Hill Street Blues*. Kenny Henderson did not help my situation either. He kept following me around, telling me that his teacher last year never did things this way! At the end of that first day, I was very close to leaving that room, that school, that profession altogether. Who the heck wanted to be a teacher anyway! I could always earn my living making cabbage rolls, a profession in which I had at least some minimal competence.

In the years that followed, I found to my astonishment and consternation that what I had endured in making the transition from teacher education to teaching practice was not unique. It is very much the same for many entering the profession, a universally shared trauma. The ordeal of those first 100 days of teaching is the beginning teacher's initiation into the profession, the time during which "virgin" teachers face up to the bankruptcy of how little they know about the applications of concepts to the realities of the classroom. Struggling to survive, beginning teachers reach out for a lifeline and grab onto something that looks as if it is going to save them, to give them what they need to handle the demands of the job. When one is drowning and reaching, one does not spend a lot of time thinking carefully about the choices one is making. One simply grabs and holds on for dear life. Having thus grabbed, however, teachers find themselves on one of several pathways that influence their continued professional development.

One pathway on which some teachers find themselves keeps them on that relentless search for the "answers" to complex, death-defying classroom questions, angry with those "in the know" who do not provide them. These teachers

are continually frustrated because inservice workshops and consultant “experts” repeatedly fail to provide them with precise cures for all their classroom ills. Survival on this pathway is dependent on the teacher’s ability to assign blame for things that do not work to others.

Another pathway to survival is taken by those who have given up their quest and parachuted out of the profession into some more lucrative and less confounding job, like selling real estate or computer software. A third pathway to survival finds teachers shutting their eyes and their minds to the demands of the classroom, carrying out teaching in mechanical and mind-numbing ways. If it’s 10 o’clock, it must be spelling. If it’s October, the children are cutting out patterned paper pumpkins. Teaching methods are rarely subject to reflection or to consideration of cause and effect. Survival depends on following the prescripts of the teachers’ manual as if it were a holy book, as if teaching were a religious ritual.

The most difficult survival pathway is taken by conscious choice. Teachers who choose this lifeline engage in a never-ending process of applying knowledge to practice and trying to make meaning out of the relationship between what they do and the impact of those actions on learners. In these classrooms, teachers constantly take risks in trying to make sense of what they see and hear, learning to use their own professional resources to interpret what is going on and making choices about what to do in each new situation. Teachers who choose this pathway accept that choices are not answers. They understand that while some choices lead to effective resolutions, other choices produce less-than-satisfying results. They understand that doing the “best you can” is often the best you can do; that the search for the right answers is illusory.

Why would teachers make a conscious choice of such a difficult pathway? Why would anyone choose a professional life in which everything they see and do is subject to the critical scrutiny of reflective practice? Is this professional survival? For teachers who have made such a choice, it is a matter of life and death, for to teach reflectively is to give life to students and to self, while any other route is professionally terminal. In taking the more arduous pathway, teachers continue to grow and learn on the job. One cannot grow professionally without risking. Without growth, one cannot hope to make a significant difference in the lives of children.

#### **LIFE IN THE UNCERTAIN WORLD OF PROFESSIONAL DECISION MAKING: IT DEPENDS!**

Arguably, the most frequently heard questions in education courses are variations on the theme “What do you do when . . . ?” These questions come from students who are searching desperately for help in finding the specific,