The Role of the Instructor in the Case Method

By Kenneth R. Andrews

When cases and case discussions rather than textbooks and lectures constitute the major vehicle of teaching, what is the part which the instructor should play in the classroom? On this question there are perhaps almost as many opinions as there are case instructors. In the following paper, Kenneth R. Andrews offers one concept of the instructor's role.

I

Everything said in any symposium dedicated to the "case method" of teaching administration raises questions about the role of the instructor. What is his job?

At first glance his duties seem less onerous than those of a lecturer in the mainstream of educational tradition. Students seem to do all the thinking, most of the talking, and make for themselves the relevant discoveries. If they originate the ideas, organize the discussion, and establish their own rate of progress, their instructor need not prepare lectures, prescribe texts, serve up precepts in palatable form, or test for regurgitation of fact and principle. If the end is not knowledge, the instructor need not know all.

In actuality, however, the direction of free discussion toward specific goals increases the demands made upon the instructor. Active student participation in the learning process serves no purpose unless class discussions are emotionally satisfying, intellectually productive, and occasionally profound enough to provide prejudice-shattering encounters with the facts of life. The instructor is responsible, therefore, for the value of the talk he presides over. He hopes the talk will broaden judgment and affect behavior.
Case teaching, in short, like case learning, calls for more skill than knowledge. The instructor provides the impromptu services which any group discussion requires. He keeps the proceedings orderly. He should be able to ask questions which invite advance in group thinking and at the same time reveal the relevance of the talk that has gone before. He needs the ability to weave together the threads of individual contributions into a pattern which not only he but his class can perceive. He needs the sense of timing which tells him that a discussion is not moving fast enough to make good use of available time or is racing away from the comprehension of half the class. He knows what to do on such occasions. He exercises control over an essentially "undirected" activity, but at the same time he keeps out of the way, lest he prevent his class from making discoveries new also to him. Since unpredictable developments always distinguish real learning, he examines his class rather than his subject. His workshop is not the study but the classroom. He is the architect of a constantly complicating social structure, for a poorly integrated group cannot provide for itself much educational experience. He must himself be a student.

Now, as if the skills which case teaching particularly demands were not enough, the case instructor ideally exercises as well the intellectual and social skills of preceptorial teaching, without the advantages of preparing in advance how and when he will exercise them. The most important condition of all learning is the interest of the learner. In case teaching, the instructor not only catches the interest of his students, he keeps them interested in each other, in the case before them, and in the aims of the course. His own share of the pedagogical virtues—inspiration, humor, approachability, enthusiasm, articulateness—must be as substantial as any sophomore spellbinder's, and his skill in drawing upon them must be adequate to situations he cannot predict.

In the face of these large requirements (placed side by side with the limiting fact that faculty members must be recruited from the human race), I think it is fortunate that the skills demanded are not beyond the range of skills which can be learned. The case method is itself an ample vehicle for the training of instructors. It appears to be as efficient in finally producing qualified professors as in preparing students to learn from experience. Despite the truth that, as in the case method of learning administration, no hard and fast rules exist to regulate the pedagogy, I think it still possible to inquire into the instructor's function and how he can play his difficult role with passable effectiveness.

The ideal conduct cited here may seem and may be an unrealistic celebration of unattainable skills. Part of the vitality of the case method, however, is the restlessness of aspiration it stirs among those who learn and teach. The goals are as important as the performance, which may fall short of them. If no one person can exercise continually the skills I consider desirable, he at least acquires a sense of direction from seeing ahead of him the course he wants to follow.

At the outset, description of the role of the instructor cannot be a quest for technique. There are many "case methods"; the multiplicity is traceable to differences among successful teachers and to the variety of case materials. No teacher qualified by the communicable enthusiasm demanded by his profession is barred from developing his own gifts. No static procedure should stereotype his approach to his classes.

To fill the gap left by the elimination of technique, the instructor addresses himself to the combination of case, class, and subject he is teaching. He formulates teaching practices to accommodate the variables in the classroom situation before him. He subordinates his personal aspirations and convictions to his observations of classroom reality. Students learn that successful treatment of a case consists most often of examining the case situation as primarily a configuration of fact and feeling which must be dealt with as such rather than as an example of an inductively attainable generalization. When the instructor adopts toward his students and his subject the same orientation, he is ready to lead a case discussion and remain free himself in exercising his leadership. To the man who is looking at the territory, ways to cross it become clear and classroom progress becomes measurable.

Within the latitude thus available, two general activities need additional attention. It seems to me tentatively true that in the way most natural to him the instructor must work consciously first to build and protect a cooperative, informal relationship between himself and his students. The second task common to all varieties of case instruction is the stimulation of discussion toward course and school objectives. Common to both these creative aspects of the instructor's role is the paradoxical problem of
control. The instructor must keep discussion free and yet direct its course toward productive ends. As an instructor, he finds himself cast as a student. Now, as a nonauthoritarian leader, he discovers he must be an administrator as well.

II

Successful application of the case method of instruction to the classroom presumes a relationship between student and instructor and among students which is quite different from that prevailing under more traditional forms of instruction. Students now are not sitting at a professor's feet; they find themselves forced to stand on their own. The instructor cannot be a lawgiver or an oracle. He establishes himself—preferably without saying so—as a fellow student and proves by behavior that he means it. He makes himself available as an equal when his students are conditioned to expect him to assert himself as their superior. His students, initially confused by both method and instructor, come eventually to know that his participation will provide all the help they need.

In preceptorial teaching, the instructor appears as an authority. Students, he hopes, listen to him. In quiz-sessions or discussion periods, he often probes into or patronizes their ignorance, exposes their failacies, reveals their deficient preparation. He exhorts faster and faster absorption and use of what he has found to be worth learning. He sits in judgment over the acquisition of communicable wisdom. No matter how brilliant and kindly, he stands in relation to his students as a critic. In case teaching, such a relationship, especially when complicated by the initial confusion attending the method, is never fully productive. Undistorted communication and mutual understanding in the classroom, as everywhere, are possible only when adverse criticism is not explicitly or implicitly involved and when self-consciousness, emulation, and anxieties of all sorts can be laid aside.

Confusion and insecurity will never be replaced by independence and tough-mindedness in the classroom until a case has been laid open by discussion and has yielded up gain to its students. That in turn will not happen while confusion clouds the search. The instructor can break out of this circle by giving his first attention to an atmosphere not of disapproval but of informal friendliness that will permit students to grope their way to competence.

The instructor can listen with an intentness that should not be concealed to everything that is said, with the demonstrated purpose of understanding, not criticizing, its relevance and importance. He can best teach respect for student views by exhibiting it himself. He can help people say what they are stumbling over. He can, with questions that show his interest (not his brilliance), help a man make his point clear or clarify his thinking until it is expressible. The instructor can demonstrate that he will not with approval or disapproval fence in the discussion or insist that the same formal approach be taken to every case. If initially he extends the same interest to all things said without trying to label them as important or trivial, his class will recognize that as individuals they can voice an incomplete idea or an unconventional conclusion without encountering derision. They may gradually feel free to fight their way publicly through ignorance, perplexity, and loose thinking without fear of being pilloried for the effort. After a few weeks of practice, students and instructor may be members of a productive group, capable of self-propulsion toward mastery of the subject. The problem of the instructor-student relationship sometimes vanishes before a startled recognition of what a group of intelligent students can accomplish without detailed dependence upon professorial authority and knowledge.

If permitted to do so, then, a new class can move beyond the banes of case discussion (collective monologue, irrelevancy, boredom, timidity, triviality, individual and group introversion) into productive discourse. Regression in the face of new cases full of essentially unsolvable problems is always possible. As time goes on, the instructor, better known now to his students and they to him, can take steps more directive than permissive to preserve the relationships once achieved.

When, as will happen, the student throws up his hands and asks the instructor to provide answers to the questions implicit in the case, the instructor may return to the student or to the class the responsibility for doing the work of the class. He will ask the student to present his own thinking first. If he wishes eventually to offer some answers, he may do so after the class has wrestled with the case, for then his answers will not have taken the place of the thinking of the class. However he handles the students' desire that he solve the problems in the case, he will not capitulate to the request
for aid and comfort unless he wishes to abandon the case method for something less painful and less effective.

In addition to disclaiming the role of authority which his students wish him to assume, the instructor may have to deal with more violent disruption. Like all social units, a class is susceptible to the volatile reactions of the individuals who comprise it. Occasionally the instructor, weary perhaps at having to play so many parts, will find himself cast briefly as group therapist. If he notices that the discussion is listless and disjointed, as eventually he will, he would do well to identify rather than ignore the block. If he asks what is going on, he will at once test the strength of his relation to the class. If that strength is adequate and if his class knows he will not misuse the information, he will get an answer, or perhaps a hundred different answers. He may then find himself in the middle of an outpouring of feelings clustered around the grading system, the work load, the complexity of recent cases, the confusion of working out a cogent attack on intangible problems—around the resurgent insecurities of genuine learning.

On a hot spring afternoon, for example, a hundred men talking about a case on administrative reorganization of a railroad grew more and more listless. The number of participants dwindled to the handful who will always talk. What they had to say threw little light on the problem of introducing change among personnel who had for years been habituated to behavior no longer acceptable to higher management. The physical restlessness, the shuffling of paper, and the collapse of interest afflicted the instructor, who was getting bored himself, so sharply that he asked, "What's gone wrong with the discussion today?"

The inattention vanished with a snap. A total silence, induced by the shock with which graduate students will usually greet implied criticism of their performance, lasted for a minute. Then one man stuck up his hand to answer that the Production exam they had just had was enough to queer any discussion of somebody else's human problems. Here he was interrupted by a man who complained both about the ventilation of the room and about the inadequacy of the information in the case. He was followed at length by a dozen other students and topics. The instructor did not hear all they said because he was considering with some concern what one visitor from the United States Military Academy and two others from civilian colleges (who were investigating the merits of the case method) were thinking about.

Finally one student announced that he had reached the point of knowing what certain people were going to say and wished he could hear some voices less often and others more. The whole class applauded. A relatively calm discussion of the problem of student participation followed, ending in agreement that the problem could be solved by students who had been holding their peace. At the end of it the instructor called a recess. For ten minutes he was assured by various members of the class that the restlessness was resentment against some of the more eager volunteers. When the class reconvened, the discussion went better—and well beyond the final bell. Students volunteered who usually spoke only when spoken to. The visitors observed that the outburst was "interesting," but they looked a little as if they thought the procedure undignified.

Dignity aside, the surest method of dealing with such an outburst is for the instructor to suppress his own defensive reactions and to refrain from combatting student emotion with faculty logic. As feeling spends itself and the class behavior itself becomes a case for analysis and action, the class will sometimes recognize its need for adjustment to reality. If some action should be taken by the instructor, he can take it, referring difficulties that do not fall under his jurisdiction to others. In any case, the instructor's role is first to detect and then to allow the free expression of any feelings that congest the premises and impede the progress of his course. If he does not, he will lose control of the climatic conditions under which a class can work effectively.

Group therapy can easily take so much time that course objectives are prejudiced. A class might, if invited to do so, prefer spilling feelings to grappling with case problems. The instructor can avoid this possibility without restricting freedom of discussion by assuming always that the case is the object of primary interest and by recalling attention to it by question or comment. He will seldom have to stop to lift the lid if everyday discussions are free rather than repressive and if arbitrary limitations on procedure do not bottle up considerations relevant from the student's point of view. The everyday humor, informality, and freedom of a temperate
classroom climate will not often breed thunderstorms, unless the instructor seems to be hoping for rain.

Creating a classroom environment that will permit achievement of important discussions and preserving it against regression are not difficult. If permitted to do so, the class will provide the structure necessary for coherent group thinking and develop a code of its own to regulate participation, to provide for progress, and to direct activity toward the greatest usefulness to the participants. If the instructor allows unity to emerge on its own terms, he is well started. If he refrains from the seven pedagogical sins of condescension, sarcasm, personal cross-examination, discourtesy, self-approval, self-consciousness, and talkativeness, he can hope for the best without worrying about the techniques whereby it can be achieved.

III

Maintenance of group good health and the formation of supple working relationships between students and instructor are only means to serve educational ends. It is instructive, of course, for the members of a class to learn by experience how to listen to each other and how to make themselves understood; but in a class, as in a more permanent organization, the purpose for which the participants are gathered together must not be lost sight of. The instructor, while he preserves the essential environmental conditions, guides the discussions toward the objectives of his course and ensures that they serve as new experience for each of the participants, including himself.

If the establishment of classroom relationships is a social skill, the direction of class discussion is primarily intellectual. This leadership must be flexibly responsive to the situation in order that the understanding which the student reaches shall be his own, not his instructor’s. The shifting situation unfolding in the classroom must be subjected to running analysis. And, as the instructor looks ahead, his leadership is that of the explorer of new territory. It is not the instructor’s highest function to lead tourists over a path worn smooth by previous trips. Each time it is taught, if it is taught well, the case is made by group analysis a situation somehow different from what it was in last year’s classes. Different approaches to its handling are called for. Different derivations, some more useful than others, will be made by different students. Without knowing in detail what each of his students is thinking at any moment, the instructor must make sure that personal decisions are finally made and that the group has accomplished whatever it began.

As the leader in the logical development of the case discussion, the instructor uses three tools of infinite flexibility which can promote the productivity of case discussion without taking from students the responsibility for doing their own work. He may (1) ask questions, (2) restate and rethread what is said, and (3) voice his own opinions and draw upon his own knowledge of fact. The attainment of skill in combining these three activities can challenge the instructor’s capacity all through his career.

For centuries, under all systems of instruction, successive generations of teachers have been asking questions. The interrogation most effective for the stimulation of case discussion derives from this great tradition, but some questions of hallowed respectability can be eliminated at once. The questions which are prepared the night before to plunge straight to the heart of the case’s knottiest congestion will either fall on deaf ears or wrench the class’s conversation out of its natural shape. Questions which seem to call attention to an individual student’s immaturity or obvious error will freeze their victims and silence the witnesses of an unfair contest. Questions designed only to establish the amount of preparation the student has devoted to the case introduce disciplinary considerations which blight more effective incentives to hard work. Questions which display the instructor’s vanity meet the fate they deserve; he has to answer them himself.

The questions the instructor finds most useful are phrased on the spot to serve their directional purpose. Depending on the stage of the discussion and the appropriateness of their context, they can be broad questions designed to open the discussion but not predetermine its course, or questions serving to clarify what an individual has said (“Do you mean that . . . ?”) or to invite expansion (“Do you have more to say about . . . ?”). In subjective areas questions should identify opinions that have been stated as facts, re-establish the tentativeness of bald statements about what is rather than what may be, and qualify dogmatism in any form (“Do you think that true in all such cases?” “How does that apply to the situation described in this case?”).
As a discussion takes shape, questions that more pointedly invite forward motion toward understanding the basic issues of the case, or that keep attention on issues as already defined, or that objectively inquire into the premises upon which a facile conclusion rests become possible because they arise naturally out of the requirements for acceleration which an interested class will respond to as time grows short. The questions drawing upon all the skill an instructor can muster are those which serve to suggest, when they are thought about, connections between individual contributions made by students or connections between cases as they accumulate toward the unity dictated by course objectives. It is chiefly in the perception of a continuity linking separate situations that many students come to learn from case experience. ("Is your point related to Mr. Y's?" "Does your observation apply also to yesterday's case?" "What does that have to do with the bigger questions of . . . that we have been looking at?")

The most directive questions are those which sometimes an instructor finds himself asking when a class has passed beyond the point where under its own power it can cope with the case. When the issues have been examined and decision is imminent but not easy, questions from the instructor can serve to restrict unintentional evasions, unproductive repetition, and the backward wash of the discussion as it beats against the toughness of the problem. Here he must ask for what he and his students do not yet know—how this objective can be reached, that problem solved, this countercheck guarded against. Often these questions can be as insistent as earlier questions were nondirective, for by this time they are reminders of what the whole class wants to know. So long as the class continues to wrestle with the problem, then questions are effective. If the answer is not forthcoming, the instructor should not begin to plant ideas or fish for specific materials. The case left unfinished is often more productive of further progress next time than one polished off by the instructor as the closing bell strikes.

Questioning comes so naturally to pedagogues that as a tool of the case method it can easily be overused. Ordinarily in a free-flowing discussion questions can be infrequent. If the questions come casually and naturally as responses to what has been said (rather than pop out of the instructor's mental file of "points not covered yet"), not only will they be understood and quickly responded to but they will be inconspicuous aids to the discussion, serving to advance but not to force the discussion. The good case analysis is not a series of questions by instructor and answers by the students. When students follow each other without interference by the instructor, his role as questioner is thereafter to keep himself and everybody else informed about what is going on and where they are going. One of the best classes I have ever attended was opened by the instructor's asking, "Mr. X, will you begin?" No other questions were necessary that day.

The question is the invitation to further thought, the reminder that discussion must get somewhere, the lever for control of the intellectual product of group intelligence. Restatement, the second major activity of many instructors, is the means by which the progress prompted by the question is marked, clarified, and made usable.

A free-flowing discussion, moving fast, winding back upon itself, eddying about semantic snags, is extraordinarily hard to follow. The remarks made by the individual students are almost all impromptu; they usually last less than half a minute. They are often incompletely thought out and are always imperfectly expressed. A man sometimes seems to change his mind in the middle of a sentence. The instructor can slow the current and clear its course by pausing frequently to rephrase very briefly in his own words what has been said. Less often he may summarize the entire discussion to date.

The principal function of restatement is to translate individual remarks into a common language for purposes of clarification. As each student comments, he speaks in his own language and from his own understanding of himself and of the case. The instructor's contribution is to make sure that the substance, clarified by restatement, forms part of the visible accretion. As he verifies what has been said, he gives the student an opportunity to correct or extend the new version of his remarks.

If restatement is to be constructively directive, it must not distort the student's comment either by minimizing its implicit content or by exaggerating it. The instructor must not jump to conclusions about what the student means to say, must make no substantive additions, and must not suggest by the spirit of his impromptu condensation that he agrees or disagrees with the observations. He may point up the idea; he may turn it in his hand so that all the facets are
visible. The student himself may be surprised by seeing his idea thus illuminated; but he should not often feel that he did not say that and that his meaning has been distorted. If, as sometimes happens, distortion does occur, or if the student's thinking advances, as it should, as he hears the paraphrase, he must be able to correct or expand the record without rebuff from the instructor.

To restate what has been said, in order to assist understanding without making students permanently dependent on such assistance, is a delicate task, but not an extraordinarily difficult one. If the instructor listens intently to what is said and if he tries to understand before he tries to evaluate, he will understand it. Useful restatement requires only willingness to listen and concentration upon what is said. The astonishing results which this willingness and concentration produce when applied to an apparently innocuous comment will do more than exhortation can to persuade a class toward the same efforts in understanding each other's point of view, skill, and experience.

The recognition which restatement permits in student and class can also be achieved by a periodical summary of class discussions. This sort of performance by the instructor can indirectly point the way to further progress by marking and underscoring that already achieved. It should not be a regular occurrence. Most of the time the student must summarize for himself, just as he must decide for himself what he has learned. No one else can tell him. Sometimes, however, a restatement of the major themes of a particularly complex discussion will retrieve for further thinking important issues which might otherwise elude attention. Such occasions give the instructor opportunity to identify ideas with the names of the students who proposed them first. Casual recognition of the sources of important individual contributions is a means to acknowledge to those responsible the debt of the group and to imply that within the structure of group performance it is individual capacity for original thinking and cooperative behavior that a school of administration exists to foster.

The third instrumentality for control of discussions and achievement of course objectives, statement by the instructor of his own objectives and of his own knowledge of fact, is much more heavy-handed than the question and the restatement. If the instructor announces his own views early, he may shut off the opinions of students who disagree or encourage unduly those who share his sentiments. If he draws heavily on his own experience, he may bore the inattentive or reduce to silence those who feel they cannot speak with such authority. If he lectures at length, he may exceed the capacity for useful absorption. Under the case method the role of the instructor is so heavily weighted toward leadership as a participant rather than toward authoritative direction that there are those who hold that an instructor should never project his own opinions and information into the deliberations of his students.

It seems to me unnatural to proscribe this activity, so long as it is participation and is not (however well-intentioned) a kind of overlordship. When the essential relationship between student and class has been successfully formed and tested, then the instructor can speak as a participant and will usually be listened to as such. He need not fear that his remarks will be interpreted as quotations from tablets of stone if the students know how he intends them. He can circumvent the dangers of being misunderstood, which always vitiate one-way communication, by waiting to speak until his questions have stimulated answers which have been examined from all sides and until mutual understanding of the major threads of the discussion has been verified by restatement. Then, knowing his students and knowing the route whereby they have reached the farthest destination of which they are currently capable, he can contribute his ideas to the common pool. And he should, if his ideas seem likely to stimulate further progress into subsequent cases.

The most enthusiastic supporters of the case method recognize that, after all, there is a limit to the altitude to which a class can lift itself by its own bootstraps. If questioning fails to clear the way, the instructor can speak to regenerate the self-propulsive power of the class or to clarify a difficulty surmountable only with technical knowledge. "Lecture" may begin or end a class hour or appear at any point when progress in discussion is balked by lack of information. Since the resumption of discussion will provide a test of how well the instructor was understood and since he speaks his piece only when his class has need of it, is ready for it, and can make use of it, he has an enormous advantage over the full-time lecturer. The flexibility of the case method, then, is such that it will accommodate some of the practices of preceptorial teaching, so long as the instructor's orientation permits.
recognition of the classroom situation as the guide to action.

The instructor who is curious about the case method may well take alarm at such dissections as this. In the absence of abundant classroom transcripts to provide illustrative material, he may still wonder how questions may be asked, opinions restated, and personal knowledge and opinion presented to meet the requirements of classroom climate and to approach the objectives which the case method envisions. The answer to the how question resides in the class performance. Close attention to what is going on before the platform will provide after the first five minutes of the first case discussion more questions than can possibly be asked, more ideas than can be examined through recapitulation, and material for more professorial comment than a man can express in a week. The problem of controlling a discussion will cease to be difficult when the capacity of students for free discussion is released; techniques for playing the instructor's role become unnecessary. With the knowledge of his subject and with sufficient nimbleness of mind to qualify him for any rostrum, his hand on the reins can be light. He derives his teaching practices from the class, not from any less useful source.

However his judgment prompts him to behave in the classroom, the instructor plays a multiple role. He is student, listener, analyst. He is questioner, paraphraser, and minuteman lecturer. He plays these parts without costume changes, and he never steals the show from the rest of the cast.