EDPS 730 -- Seminar on Case Study Methods  
Fall, 2010

Instructor: Betty Malen

Time and Place: Wednesday, 4:15-7:00 PM, Benjamin Building, Room 2101.
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Office Hours: By appointment; call home, call office, or email malen@umd.edu

General Description: Conceived as both an overview of case study methods and a laboratory for applying course content to research topics/projects of interest to students, this course addresses a range of conceptual, methodological, ethical, political, and logistical issues embedded in efforts to conduct "disciplined" case study research. This course may be particularly helpful to students who are exploring various approaches to research or students who are contemplating using case study methods in their seminar papers, theses or doctoral dissertations.

Major Objectives: This course seeks to

(a) expose students to alternative perspectives on case study research;

(b) generate insights about the appropriate purposes and uses of case study research as well as the criteria by which to judge the quality and utility of this research;

(c) enhance understandings about the relationship between case study research and theory development, policy formation and evaluation, and informed action;

(d) become more cognizant of the challenges embedded in doing "good" case study research, the criticisms that get leveled against case study research, and the potential benefits and limitations of this approach to research;

(e) provide opportunities to develop "justifications" and appraisals of particular kinds of case study designs and to critique illustrative case studies on topics of special interest to students.

Course Content, Structure and Approach: The course content is summarized on the attached outline and proposed schedule. Structured around three major units, the course begins with an overview of case study research, revisits key aspects of case study research in greater depth and then focuses on students' application of course content to their unique research interests. The various topics will be addressed through presentations, readings, discussions, written assignments, small group "work sessions," individual conferences and small group conferences where appropriate.

Course Development Acknowledgments: This course was developed, initially, with substantial assistance from Marcy Leonard who was, at the time, a doctoral student and is currently a secondary school principal in the Howard County Public Schools. Students who have taken this course since it was first offered have provided insightful feedback on its contents, structure and strategies and have produced papers that are now incorporated as instructional resources.

Course Assumptions: This course makes four major assumptions.

(1) This seminar assumes that students have had "uneven" exposure to research designs and methods. It seeks to build on understandings emphasized in other, more general offerings, notably EDPA 690 and EDPA 700 or equivalent courses. It also seeks to compensate for gaps in students' backgrounds, through readings that address fundamental aspects of research writ large, as well as critical aspects of case study research, per se. The readings should help us develop more common understandings and vocabularies.

(2) This seminar assumes that the knotty design issues embedded in case study research should receive more attention than particular data collection strategies. While all aspects of the research process are important, design issues are key. The manner in which those issues are handled often determines whether the research has
inevitable limitations (as in any research venture) or "fatal flaws." Data collection strategies are also critical, but those matters can be addressed more readily through independent readings as well as through other, more generic methods courses.

(3) This seminar assumes that case study research, like other research, must be rigorous. That is, case study research must attend to a host of issues regarding the relationship between evidence and inference, and a host of concerns surrounding validity, reliability, causality and generalizability. While some scholars employ alternative terms, such as credibility or transferability, and, while some argue that conventional notions of rigor do not apply to "qualitative" research, this course takes a stance. It seeks to help students understand how to address, not avoid, these fundamental aspects of research as they conceptualize, conduct, and communicate their case studies.

(4) This seminar assumes that learning about case studies is an iterative process. Thus the course introduces and revisits key aspects of case study research in class sessions. Such an iterative process marks how many case studies are conceptualized and how many write-ups of case studies are constructed. Hopefully, this approach, and the "purposeful redundancy" that is part and parcel of it, will serve as a sensible approach for students in this class.

Course Limitations: The course is an introduction to, not an in-depth treatment of, a complex, contested terrain. The topics addressed illustrate but they do not exhaust the full range of issues that could (arguably should) be examined. Since the topics included are complicated and controversial, they warrant more attention than can be given in a semester course. This class provides some, but certainly not all of the foundational understandings and literature sources required to develop a research methods section for a major research venture, like a thesis, dissertation or grant-funded project.

Among the many obvious limitations of the course is the modest attention given quantitative methods. Though case study research may incorporate, and, in some instances benefit from, both quantitative and qualitative data collection/analysis strategies, the emphasis here is on qualitative methods because those are often the major data collection strategies employed in case study research. Another limiting slant relates to the emphasis on case study research and policy development. Case studies can enhance understandings of the conditions to be affected by policy interventions as well as provide data regarding how policy alternatives play out in particular contexts. The policy bent is important; however, that emphasis is not a complete picture of the multiple uses of case study research in education.

Course Requirements: The course has 5 major requirements:

1. Reading Assignments. Each student is responsible for all required readings specified on the syllabus and other readings which may be assigned during the semester (when the instructor learns more about students' interests/backgrounds). Required readings include three books (available through the UMCP bookstore and the UMCP library) and additional articles and papers (on Blackboard). The books are Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education by Sharan Merriam; The Art of Case Study Research by Robert Stake, and Case Study Research: Design and Methods by Robert Yin. The additional readings include classic and contemporary readings that illustrate and augment concepts presented and discussed in class sessions. They also includes sample case studies and sample research proposals. This "menu" of readings is used to provide a common information base, to accommodate different academic backgrounds, to accommodate different learning styles, and to help students get a sense of the range of work that falls under the rubric of "case study" research. Again, the required readings may be adjusted or supplemented, as the instructor gets a clearer understanding of students' backgrounds and interests.

2. Class Participation. Each student is expected to make contributions to the issues being addressed in class sessions. Participation is weighted at 10% of the course grade. Participation grades will be based on the quality rather than the number of comments or questions; on evidence of informed/insightful contributions to the issues being addressed.

3. Written Analysis of Alternative Perspectives on Case Study Research. This paper is a critical, comparative analysis of three authors' (Merriam, Stake & Yin) perspectives on key aspects of case study research. This paper is more fully described on the Assignment Attachment that follows the course calendar. The first four
class sessions should provide much of the groundwork for this assignment. This paper counts for 30% of the course grade.

4. **Written Critique of a Case Study/Studies.** This paper is a critical review of a student-selected, instructor-approved case study (or case studies). This assignment is more fully described on the Assignment Attachment. It will be discussed in class as well. It counts for 30% of the course grade.

5. **Individualized Paper, "Mini" Research Proposal or "Mini" Case Study.** Students will develop a paper that links course content with their particular research interests. For example, students may develop a "mini" research proposal in which they make "A Case for a Case Study." This paper would lay out a case study research design and the lines of argument to justify this design as an appropriate, potentially fruitful way to investigate a particular topic/phenomenon. Or, students might carry out a "mini" case study. This paper defines the type of case study being conducted, explains the methods used, reports the findings and discusses the implications of the study. These options are more fully described on the Assignment Attachment. If students wish to propose other projects, they are encouraged to do so. In order to align this assignment to students' academic experiences and their "stage" in their graduate program, students are encouraged to meet with the professor on the particulars of this paper before mid-term. This assignment counts for 30% of the course grade.

**Student Assessments, Grades:** As the preceding paragraphs make clear, course grades will be based on instructor assessments of class participation and written assignments, weighted as follows:

- Participation: 10%
- Alternative Perspectives on Case Study Research: 30%
- Critique of Case Study or Case Studies: 30%
- Application Paper: 30%

As earlier noted, participation grades will be based on the quality rather than the number of comments or questions; on evidence of informed/insightful contributions to the issues being addressed. Paper assessments will be based on the following criteria: clear purpose and preview of ideas, coherent organization, cogent reasoning, capacity to tether the paper to readings; ability to use relevant information to support interpretations, and appropriate use of the English language. "Re-writes" are permitted and encouraged. In some cases, rewrites may be required.

If students have any concerns about the grades/feedback they receive, they should speak with the instructor, directly. Per university policy, students may appeal their grades. The procedures for doing so are contained in the graduate studies handbook. The department has an academic appeals committee that students may contact for information and assistance.

**University of Maryland Honor Code:** Per the Student Honor Council's request to post this notice: "The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information...please visit http://www.shc.umd.edu."

**Disability-based Accommodations:** Class members who have a documented disability requiring academic accommodation should contact the instructor.

**Religious Observances:** Absences for religious holidays and events will be accommodated. Students affected should contact the instructor for assistance in securing information about class sessions they have missed or assignment due dates that may have to be adjusted.

**Medically-Necessitated Absences:** Absences for illness will be accommodated under the conditions specified in the university policy (http://www.president.umd.edu/policies/v100g.html). Students should contact the instructor if they will miss more than one class for medical reasons and discuss how to document the medically-necessitated absences and how to make-up the missed class sessions.
Invitations and Suggestions:

(1) Conversations and conferences about the written assignments or other course-related matters can be initiated at any time throughout the semester, in class sessions or at other times.

(2) In preparing for class, students are encouraged to "map" the readings, to make notes regarding the purpose, thesis, central lines of argument and nature and quality of the evidence used to develop the ideas. Following each class, students are encouraged to re-read or review these materials to clarify ideas and "clinch" insights.

(3) In developing written assignments, consider keeping a "jot journal;" working from outlines; sharing ideas with others in order to clarify what you are trying to convey; drafting "analytic notes" to yourself; including [ ] information to let the reader know what you are thinking; inviting candid reactions; weighing the feedback received and rewriting and refining main ideas and supporting lines of argument.

(4) Students are encouraged to bring in relevant readings, including sample case studies, and share those with the class and the instructor. Many, rich sources of information are available to help us think through research issues. If you find a reading, be it a book, article, essay, case study, technical report or research critique helpful, someone else may as well. So, feel free to embellish the materials we consider in this course by bringing in pieces that you find helpful.
Proposed Course Schedule

Unit One
Overview of Case Study Research

This section of the course is designed to provide a broad introduction to case study research from the vantage point of three major writers in the field. In this unit, we will examine different definitions of and approaches to case study research. This background should provide a basis for the more focused treatments of key aspects of case study research that follow.

September 7: Introduction to the Course and to the Notion of "Disciplined Inquiry"

After reviewing course aims, approaches, requirements, evaluation procedures, "group agreements," and the like, we discuss Shulman’s notion of "disciplined inquiry." Students should be prepared to discuss the following questions: How does Shulman define disciplined inquiry? What distinguishes disciplined inquiry from other types of information gathering activities? How does the notion of disciplined inquiry add to our understanding of the research process? Does this concept omit or diminish important aspects of the research process?

Since disciplined inquiry involves (among other things) developing coherent lines of argument (e.g., for what you hope to study, how you will carry out your research, why you will conduct your research a particular way, what you have found and what those findings mean), we review an excerpt on writing persuasive arguments. This skill is particularly important for those interested in carrying out compelling case study research so we will look at a tool that can help us examine the key components of links in an argument.

We will apply the notion of disciplined inquiry (and the related notion of coherent argument) to two writings: “Her sister’s keeper…” and “Black women beating the odds….” Students should be prepared to discuss whether these writings are forms of disciplined inquiry or in what ways they exhibit (or do not exhibit) the distinctive features of disciplined inquiry. Students also should be prepared to examine the central thesis and the supporting lines of argument in each selection.

Required Readings:


September 14: Alternative Perspectives on Case Study Research, Part 1

In this session we revisit the notion of disciplined inquiry and relate it to various definitions of case study research, efforts to distinguish case study research from other research strategies and systems for characterizing and classifying case studies. We discuss the potential strengths and limitations (empirical and theoretical) of different kinds of cases and identify design issues that case study researchers confront.
Required Readings:
Merriam, chapters 1-3, Yin, chapters 1-2, and Stake, chapters 1-3, 6 & 10. Note Stake's directions re: when to read chapter 10. Read with an eye toward identifying how the authors define case study research and how their definitions relate to the notion of disciplined inquiry.

Review Brown, Deenen L. (2000, January 23). "Her sisters' keeper." The Washington Post Magazine, pp. 14-17, 26-27. Read with an eye toward discussing whether this piece is a case study. Is it a case narrative? a case study? a catalyst for doing a case study? Think about how Merriam, Yin & Stake would classify this writing. Think too, about what the article is a "case" of. In other words, what is the phenomenon of interest? How might various types of case studies be used to more fully examine the phenomenon of interest?

Review O'Connor, Carla. (2002). “Black women beating the odds from one generation to the next: How the changing dynamics of constraint and opportunity affect the process of educational resilience.” American Educational Research Journal, 39 (4) 855-903. Read with an eye toward discussing how this article illustrates the dimensions along which one might distinguish a case study from a case story.


September 21: Alternative Perspectives on Case Study Research, Part 2

We draw on Stake and Yin to illustrate, compare and contrast the range of views regarding aspects of case study research and to highlight the contested character of case study research. We revisit issues of definition, form and function and begin considering issues of rigor. Guide questions include: How is case study research defined and distinguished from other research strategies? What forms might such research take? What are the appropriate purposes and uses of case study research? How are case studies to be designed? How can cases be framed and selected? How can data be collected, analyzed and communicated? How is the "quality" of case study research assessed? How are issues of "rigor" and relevance addressed? These and other questions serve as an orienting/organizing framework for illustrating alternative conceptions of case study research.

Required Readings:
All chapters of Stake and Yin.


September 28: Alternative Perspectives on Case Study Research, Part 3

Drawing on Stake, Yin, Merriam, and related readings, we continue the discussion of the different (at times contested) approaches to case study designs and the various (at times contested) approaches to the inter-related processes of collecting, selecting, analyzing and interpreting data; developing and inspecting lines of argument; and composing the case report.

Required Readings:
Review Stake, Yin and Merriam, all chapters; review Rosenberg and Levine.
October 5: Alternative Perspectives on Case Study Research, Part 4

This session will be dedicated to peer reviews of drafts of the first paper. Students will have forwarded drafts of their papers to a sub-set of class members prior to our class session. The class time will be used to share feedback on individual papers and to identify issues that warrant attention in the papers and in the course.

October 12: Understanding and Applying Case Study Methods: A Conversation with Dr. Paul Baumann, Education Commission of the States

Paul encountered case study research as a graduate assistant on several research projects. He also used a case study design in his dissertation. This session is devoted to a discussion of his experiences with case study research designs.

Required Readings:

Unit Two
Creating Quality Case Studies

This section "zooms in" on issues associated with case study research. It reexamines elements of case study research with an eye towards the ways the issues and challenges (conceptual, methodological, political and ethical) embedded in this genre of research might be responsibly addressed. Readings listed in this section may be adjusted to accommodate students' backgrounds and interests. Throughout this section of the course, students are strongly encouraged to discuss how these broad issues and challenges might be manifest in the research they are doing (or planning to do) and how they might be addressed.

October 19: Theoretical Foundations/Contributions of Case Study Research, Paper #1 Due

Since this course assumes that "good" case studies begin and end with the consideration of theory, this session is designed to help students understand the linkages between case study research and theoretical advancements. We will examine the debates regarding (a) the relationship between theory development and case study research and (b) the degree of formalization and flexibility in the research design. Most of this session addresses how theory can help one get clear about (a) the phenomenon of study, (b) the vantage point from which the phenomenon is to be viewed, (c) the primary purpose of the study and (d) the type of case study that might be most appropriate. We will discuss how choices on these matters affect decisions about site selection, data sources and methods, data analysis, study interpretations and related arguments regarding the empirical and conceptual "significance" of the study. In other words, we will try to come full circle to show how theory is used to design the study and how the design of the study influences the ways the study can contribute to theory.

Readings for this session define a "conceptual framework" and show how the conceptual framework operates as a causal orientation, a parameter setting device, an interpretive schema and a bridging device that connects findings of studies to related bodies of literature. They illustrate how to utilize extant literature and how to check to be sure that the study design "fits" the phenomena of study and that the methods are appropriate to the questions. The readings also provide the basis for a candid discussion of issues involved in framing and "doing" case study research.

Required Readings:


Review:

Shulman, "Disciplined Inquiry," Yin, chpt. 2; Merriam, chpt. 3

Recommended Reading:

October 26: Developing the Design: Issues, Options, Trade-offs and Potential Contributions to Policy Analysis and Evaluation

This session revisits design issues and the trade-offs embedded in them. The session illustrates how various types of case studies are described and justified and how case study findings might be used to examine policies and to illuminate broader notions about, as well as particular instances of, the phenomenon of interest.

Required Readings:


Recommended Readings:


November 9: Rigor in Case Study Research: Inferences, Arguments and Standards of “Quality”

Since case studies often are dismissed as non-rigorous research, one challenge for researchers using case study methodology is to ensure that their work meets the standards of "disciplined inquiry." Meeting those standards involves systematically attending to the logic that undergirds the arguments developed as data are reported and interpreted. Therefore, we examine these most basic processes which
are all too often given short-shrift in the design, conduct and communication of research. We also identify additional "criteria" for judging the quality of case study research and use those criteria to assess sample case studies.

**Required Readings:**

Review Shulman, "Disciplined inquiry," and Yin, "What makes an exemplary case study?"


**Recommended reading:**


**November 16: Rigor in Case Study Research: Validity, Reliability, Causality and Generalizability**

The previous session on rigor focused on the relationship between data, warrant and claim. While these foundational understandings are necessary, they are not sufficient. Meeting the standards of "disciplined inquiry" also involves conducting research in ways which add to the confidence one can have in the data secured and the interpretations rendered. Since the analyst is often viewed as the instrument in case study research, we pay particular attention to this aspect of case study research as well as to other sources of bias and error and the range of strategies case study researchers can employ to address issues of validity, reliability, causality and generalizability.

**Required Readings:**

Review Lecompte & Goetz, Yin, chapters 2-5; Merriam, chapter 10; and Stake, chapter 7.


Recommended Reading:


November 23:  No class. Thanksgiving

November 30:  Revisiting the Justifications, Contributions and Limitations of Case Study Research, Paper #2 Due

This session seeks to integrate insights about case study research by revisiting the rationales for the use of case studies, the conditions under which case studies are particularly appropriate, the common criticisms of case studies, the criteria for judging the merit and worth of case studies, and the various contributions that can be made by particular cases, by "aggregated" cases, and by well grounded, programs of research. Students should be prepared to highlight insights from their paper #2 assignment and from their in progress work on paper #3.

Required Readings:


Examples (subject to change): Using case studies to test theories, to extend existing theory and to generate "new" theory.


Unit Three
Applying Understandings: Developing a Quality Case Study

This portion of the course provides additional opportunities for students to talk through how they are applying their understandings of case study methods to their specific research interests. Students may work individually and/or collaboratively to complete their final paper. In developing paper #3 (or other assignments, for that matter) students are encouraged to talk with their advisors and/or other faculty who may have expertise in the topic areas they have selected and/or in case study methodology.
December 7:  Student Exchanges /Cross-cutting Issues/Opportunities for Further Study, Course Appraisal and Follow-ups

In addition to opportunities to discuss issues students confronted in their final course papers, this last session provides opportunities to talk about how to bridge the introductory work in the course and the additional work necessary to develop a stronger command of case study research. Students will draw on course readings and course papers to identify "cross-cutting concerns" that warrant further attention through additional course work, directed readings, and independent research. Finally, we will "debrief" the class and identify ways the course might be improved.

December 13:  Final Paper Due.

Course Assignments and Additional Resources

Paper #1  Alternative Perspectives on Case Study Research (10-12 pages).

This paper asks students to analyze three authors' (Merriam, Stake & Yin) perspectives on case study research. At minimum, the paper should (a) identify the major purposes of case study research, its various forms and distinctive features; (b) define, compare and contrast how each author views key aspects of case study research, and (c) discuss the implications of this analysis for your understanding of case study research purposes, uses and approaches, as well as for your understanding of the "standards" case study research "should" meet.

In the introduction students should include a clear statement of purpose and an overview of how ideas in the paper will unfold.

In the body of the paper, students may wish to create a matrix so they can compare authors' positions on common dimensions of interest. However, students may use the matrix only as an analytic tool, not as a substitute for a coherent narrative about the authors' positions, including their ideas about the forms and uses of case studies, about standards and properties of quality case studies, or about other aspects (or issues) associated with case study research.

In the implications section, students may wish to talk about how their understandings of case study research have been influenced by the various authors; they may identify key questions that such a comparative analysis raises and/or the kinds of choices that case study researchers must think through. Students may also discuss other implications that occur to them as a result of this analysis.

See, for example, papers by Neil Hutchins (A constructivist in search of a more Yinian approach to case study research) and Kim Curtis (Yin, Stake and Merriam: Three perspectives on case study research).

Paper #2  Critique of a Case Study or Case Studies (10-12 pages).

This paper requires students to select and critique a case study (or case studies) on a topic of interest to them. The case study may be reported in an article, a series of articles, a book, a dissertation and/or a technical report.

Part 1 involves submitting a copy of the case along with a one-page statement regarding why this case warrants a careful review.

Part 2 involves developing an essay review of the case study/studies. This review draws on the Part 1 submission to identify/justify the choice of cases. It goes on to identify the criteria that will be used to appraise the case study research. This section of the paper draws on course readings (or other independent readings) to set up the "lens" that you will use to evaluate the case study you have selected for
review. Then, the essay discusses how the case measures up to these criteria. This section must provide reasons for the judgments rendered and make explicit the evidence that supports/qualifies those judgments.

See for example Kirk Walters’ review of Ain’t no makin’ it; Heather Ruetschlin’s paper entitled “Finding the keys....A prime example of poor case study research;” Karen Horvath-Wulf’s critique of The market for virtue: The potential and limits of corporate social responsibility; Kim Curtis’ review of a case study of the political process leading to changes in special education funding (an award winning dissertation); Paul Baumann’s paper on “Culture, coherence and craft-oriented teacher education: A critique of a case study;” and Catherine Thomas’s analysis of “Helpin novices learn to teach.”

Paper #3 Option A--A Case for A Case Study (20-25 pages).

This paper requires students to apply their knowledge of the elements of a quality case study as well as the reasons for conducting case study research in the creation of a "case for a case study." Students should identify the phenomenon of study, the key questions and the theoretical tradition(s) within which the study will be grounded. In other words, students should articulate "what this case study is a case study of" and what general theoretical perspectives will be used to guide the research. This cut at a conceptual framework will be rudimentary for most students, save those who have a strong grasp of the theoretical and empirical literature on their topic of interest. Students should describe the type of design they might use in an original case study and the reasons for their design choices. In sum, this assignment asks students to articulate the boundaries of the case study, identify the kind of case study they will be conducting and the reasons for the selection of single or multiple sites. Students should address the relationship between the kind of case study they are proposing and the empirical and theoretical contributions the study might make. The rationale for the proposed study should identify the strengths, limitations, and/or tradeoffs embedded in case study designs and should reflect an understanding of what case study research can and cannot do. Students should include a brief discussion of the data they would seek and how they might analyze these data and check for bias and error throughout the research process but the major portion of the paper should focus on the logic of the design.


This assignment permits students to "try out" this method before they decide to use it for their dissertations or for other major research projects. This paper should identify the phenomenon of study and the boundaries of the case. It should describe and assess the design of the study, report the findings and discuss those findings in light of broader literatures, or, at least suggest how such a discussion might be pursued. Along with the paper, students should submit coded copies of field notes, interview transcripts, document reviews, etc., in order to demonstrate how they moved from data to inferences to claims. The scope of the case is not an issue. The care with which the case is defined, conducted and discussed is the key. The intent is to give students the opportunity to practice "disciplined inquiry" on a limited scale before they seek to carry out more extensive and intensive case studies.

Paper #3 Option C--An Individualized Alternative

This option permits students to propose a paper that allows them to develop understandings and skills that they deem important at this time in their program. Students are responsible for initiating a conversation about the purposes and parameters of this individualized seminar paper with the professor before mid-term.

Note: Work on papers 2 and 3 should be concurrent and complementary. As students read and review case studies, they should be noting how case designs are articulated, justified, and appraised. Students are encouraged to critique case studies on topics similar to the ones they will pursue in their "case for a case study" paper or in their original case study or on topics relevant to their individualized paper 3 option.