

On the Case

in the English Language Arts Classroom

Situations for the Teaching of English

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Foreword

PETER SMAGORINSKY, *The University of Georgia, Emeritus*
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I start every day with an online reading of three newspapers. The headlines tell a variety of stories about our turbulent world: wars here, shootings there, floods over yonder, fires on the horizon, politicians pointing fingers, and other events of the day. As one who has spent most of his life teaching and learning, I am especially attentive to stories about schools. Few of these stories are of the feel-good sort. Many involve errors of judgment committed by teachers who are confronted with situations where there are no good, easy, or obvious solutions. Many stories of this sort don't end well.

Early in 2021, a group of teachers in bucolic-sounding Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, was suspended for posting an online assignment in which students were presented with the following prompt: "A slave stands before you. This slave has disrespected his master by telling him 'You are not my master!' How will you punish this slave?" The lesson provided an additional piece of information: "According to Hammurabi's Code: put to death."

According to a news report on the incident, when a parent contacted one of the teachers, "the teacher said she didn't know it would be offensive and thought it would be a good discussion for the students to have" (Perez & Langrehr, 2021). Perhaps they should have thought that one through a little more. The main discussion following the assignment concerned how long the teachers would be suspended, and if they'd ever be invited back.

Teachers face all sorts of situations that a university teacher education program could never fully prepare them for. Programs tend to have one to two semesters of coursework, followed by student teaching. These courses are often designed with state certification rules in mind, and their content may be subject to political manipulation. In my state of Georgia, politicians with no experience as educators have moved to ban and even punish the teaching of critical race theory (which is not taught); diversity, equity, and inclusion (huh?); and social-emotional learning (which makes me mad).

Program space is tight, and teaching methods tend to displace other considerations. Yet on the job, teachers face any number of situations that require their judgment beyond whether to use small groups or not. Even life off the job can be precarious, as one teacher in a neighboring county of mine found when she lost her job after posting a photo of herself with a glass of wine in Europe on a summer vacation and locating it on her social media site where it was viewable by invitation only. Some people believe they learned everything they need to know in kindergarten. For the rest of us, learning never stops, and learning about teaching is a lifelong undertaking.

Which brings me to *On the Case in the English Language Arts Classroom*. The title is slightly misleading in that the cases include situations that extend well beyond the classroom, such as engaging with parents and administrators about controversial choices (not, fortunately, about how we would treat our obstreperous “slaves”), dealing with exhaustion from the workload and secondary trauma from students’ complicated lives, developing appropriate relationships with students in extracurricular activities, and other relational and judgmental issues that teachers continually face, whether in classrooms or elsewhere. When I began teaching, I was much better prepared as a technician than as a social and moral figure on a school faculty. I learned about as much as I possibly could in my program at the University of Chicago and still came up well short in the range of understandings I needed to be a fully functioning teacher and colleague. I had to learn most of that through experience, and some of my lessons were costly.

On the Case in the English Language Arts Classroom, of course, goes beyond managing political and relational life outside the classroom. The dilemmas faced by teachers instructionally can bedevil the best of us. How does a teacher assign a controversial text in a school governed by conservative leaders who believe that teaching about racial discrimination is political and divisive and that not teaching about it is neutral and academic? What should a teacher do when an open-ended assignment about personal experiences produces writing that indicates dangerous behavior? How do teachers confront students and their parents over suspicions of cheating?

The authors classify such issues as “ill-defined” problems, those whose content is complex and whose solutions are difficult and perhaps impossible. The ones they present in this volume are mighty gnarly. Even as long as I’ve been in the business, I’d struggle with most of them myself. I think exploring these cases would greatly benefit beginning teachers—the primary audience for this book—whose teacher education programs provide good preparation for clearly defined problems such as how to produce bellringers and align instruction with standards. They often are not, however, prepared for what happens

when instruction meets the fragile lives of students and becomes ensnared in the many contexts that impinge on teachers' judgment throughout the school day, week, and year.

The cases developed for this book may not cover the range of dilemmas that teachers will face, but they are representative of many types that will inevitably complicate teachers' lives and leave them staring at the ceiling at 3 a.m. It's possible that some of the predicaments depicted in these cases, or perhaps many of them, will occur just about every week of the school year. It's also possible that how teachers manage them will determine whether they keep their jobs. It's essential, then, that they have some experience in thinking about them and how they would handle them.

Hypothetical dilemmas have provided the foundation for discussions of moral reasoning, legal snarls, and many other areas. I took a course called Cases in School Administration from Dan Lortie during my doctoral program in which we analyzed problematic cases, an experience that confirmed for me that I never want to be a school principal. The cases in *On the Case* are well crafted and road tested for their verisimilitude and potential for provoking discussions of conflicts that have no obvious solution. There is value in exploring them, disagreeing about what to do, formulating provisional action plans, and considering the broader questions they imply. The point is not to generate a firm problem-solving road map, but to begin a process of becoming informed about the range of teaching responsibilities and challenges. In spite of the common belief that "closing the classroom door" will shut out problems, that door is always wide open, and people are watching. And when they don't like what they see, they will do what they can to stomp it out.

Deliberating about these cases allows early career teachers to begin generating possible solutions. As any experienced teacher knows, the same problem plays out differently with different sets of students, parents, colleagues, administrators, and other stakeholders. A single solution path is not possible to any ill-structured problem. What this case book does is enable teachers to begin the process of recognizing situations, reading contexts, anticipating responses, and formulating actions that require continual monitoring and evaluation. Perhaps classroom observations and student teaching will provide incidents that make the cases come alive for them. It's important for them to understand that these experiences are not definitive. Taking one teacher's solution with one group of students and applying it to new classrooms may produce disastrous consequences. That's some valuable knowledge to gain early in a teaching career.

The authors of this volume are outstanding teachers with an unusual knack for creating scenarios that produce worthwhile discussions. I anticipate that discussions of these cases will be provocative for beginning teachers and fas-

cinating for teacher educators to run with their teacher candidates. I am a fan of the authors and their work in general and think that this volume will serve an important role in the social, political, and instructional development of the teachers fortunate enough to wrestle with the dilemmas that Tom McCann, Betsy Kahn, Sarah Hochstetler, and Dianne Chambers—under the watchful eye of our dear departed friend Larry Johannessen—have created.

Reference

Perez, J., & Langrehr, J. (2021, February 1). 'A grave error in judgment:' Sun Prairie teachers placed on administrative leave for virtual lesson. Channel 3000. <https://www.channel3000.com/a-grave-error-in-judgment-sun-prairie-teachers-placed-on-administrative-leave-for-virtual-lesson/>

Planning for Case Study Discussions

For the first edition of this collection of problem-based cases (*In Case You Teach English*, 2002), Larry Johannessen and Tom McCann began by reflecting on their own experiences as high school English teachers and supervisors of teachers in order to construct the narratives about the kinds of problems that might cause teachers distress and might even lead to some solid teachers abandoning the profession. As Johannessen and McCann listed the possible cases, they quickly realized that they needed to consult with early career teachers about the episodes in teaching that caused them the greatest concern. This relatively informal investigation led to a more formal program of research about the concerns of early career teachers and their means for coping with difficult situations (McCann et al., 2005; McCann & Kahn, 2017). For this substantially revised and updated version of the collection of cases, we have drawn from this research and from our combined decades of preparing, supervising, and mentoring teachers. Although Larry Johannessen is not listed on the cover as one of the authors of this book, he has made substantial contributions to the effort, and we can recognize his voice and his spirit throughout the book.

Our hope with this collection is that the inquiry demonstrated in these cases will, in a sense, compress experience and equip teachers with the analytical and strategic procedures that will serve them well when the inevitable challenges and crises occur in their own teaching lives. We expect that the users of this book will experience the following benefits: the ability to

- anticipate a variety of instructional, organizational, and personal challenges that accompany the teaching of English
- generate and evaluate a variety of responses to common problems, such as censorship demands, plagiarism, classroom management, assessment anomalies, fatigue, rapport with parents and colleagues
- develop procedures for anticipating and avoiding problems and for choosing an appropriate course of action to respond to specific challenges as they occur

- cultivate procedures and dispositions for collaborating with colleagues and other stakeholders to find constructive, student-centered responses to problems
- recognize the conditions and positions that invite problems so that a teacher can avoid unnecessary risks and develop practices that support professional growth and student learning and satisfaction

A reflective person will gain knowledge and understanding from experience. Anyone who has experienced a troublesome situation might be able, in retrospect, to identify alternative courses of action or to weigh the true gravity of a problem. Although there is no substitute for experience, when it is possible to simulate an experience realistically, the actual experience might seem less threatening and practitioners learn some problem-solving strategies they can apply to new challenges. This is the expectation that guides the use of flight simulators for pilots in training and the use of automobile simulators for novice drivers. The same sort of thinking invites active learners to engage with others in analyzing problems and discussing the possibilities for action. Case study analysis is a common practice in graduate business schools, in law schools, and in leadership education. Both early career and experienced teachers can gain much through the process of deliberating about how to work through difficult situations. Every tough situation that teachers endure prepares them to deal constructively with similar encounters.

This text offers twenty cases for study and discussion. The cases introduce a variety of problem-based situations that very easily could confront an English teacher during the course of a career. Each case has the following characteristics:

- *Immediacy*: The case suggests some urgency to decide and act, so there is limited time to ponder, research, discuss, and select a course of action.
- *Action*: The case prompts discussants to deliberate and take specific action. The situation invites collaboration and emphasizes the value of consultation with others.
- *Detail*: The case provides sufficient description of the complicating factors and competing perspectives.
- *Problem*: Each case poses a challenge of such difficulty that it is not easy to find a simple solution and a completely satisfying response. Perhaps the best a person could hope for in each situation is to find the best course of action among some poor possibilities.

Recognizing That Bad Things Sometimes Happen

The following collection of cases might give one the impression that the teaching of English is a prolonged nightmare, with each day presenting new and harrowing challenges. On the contrary, we expect that a career in the teaching of English will be richly rewarding, and most days in the classroom will be pleasant. The cases presented here represent problem situations that we have experienced, or can imagine experiencing, over a twenty-five-year career. With our selected cases, we tell twenty brief stories. If someone teaches for twenty-five years and experiences all of these problem situations, that is a rate of less than one problem per year. If you faced all of these challenges over the course of a career, that would mean fewer than one potential sleepless night each year. However, if teachers are not prepared for challenges and assume that the world of teaching is a genteel, tranquil place, with no controversy and little animosity, they may very well experience nightmares or career-ending decisions.

Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

Cooper and McNergney (1995) argue that case studies help students of teaching to think like teachers because work with the cases provides preservice teachers with practice; they are “opportunities to encounter real teaching problems in the safety and security of simulated situations” (p. 5) where teachers can try out principles of teaching and learning without causing any harm to themselves or others in the process. Drawing on experiences in other fields and some work in education, Merseth (1991) maintains there are several benefits to be derived from applying case methods to teacher education programs. Cooper and McNergney (1995, pp. 5–6) reiterate these benefits, which we summarize here:

1. In deliberating about problem-based situations, participants immerse themselves in procedures for analysis and critical decision making.
2. The deliberations about the cases require attention to competing perspectives and multiple options, which promotes a reflective stance, in the spirit of Donald Schön’s vision of “reflection in action.”
3. As with any simulated experience, the work with the cases places participants in an imagined environment, with all of its nuances and complications, and requires decision-makers to operate within the rules of the environment.

4. Whether reflecting on the cases individually or tackling them as shared inquiry with peers, preservice or experienced teachers become actively involved in learning procedures for contending with tough professional decision making.
5. Group involvement with the cases prompts lively and extensive discussions that affirm collaborative efforts and promote a sense of community.

There is little research on the use of case method teaching in teacher education. However, Sykes and Bird (1992) and Grossman (1992), drawing on research by Spiro et al. (1987), conclude that case methods may be best suited for learning in areas that could be called “ill-structured domains.” A key feature of such domains is ambiguity; they are domains in which relevant knowledge is not organized to fit a specific situation. As Grossman (1992) argues, “The value of cases for teacher education lies in their potential to represent the messy world of practice, to stimulate problem solving in a realm in which neither the problem nor the solution is clear” (p. 237). Teaching is an “ill-structured domain,” and English teaching might be the most ill-structured or messiest of them all. Each day of English teaching, events unfold differently, and teachers must orchestrate a dizzying array of factors to encourage learning. Spiro and his colleagues (1988) argue that just learning general principles is not enough to help students learn how to operate effectively in “ill-structured domains,” but the “structured dynamics of cases” are key to helping students learn how to apply the principles, or how to “reason from precedent cases” in such domains; the cases are absolutely necessary because they are the examples of the “abstract principles” (p. 379).

One of the most compelling arguments for using cases to prepare teachers, especially English teachers, is that they relate good stories. Cooper and McNergney (1995) state: “Stories are powerful and easier to remember than decontextualized information, and they seem to ‘fit’ with teachers’ ways of organizing their knowledge of teaching” (p. 5). If this is true for teachers in general, then it is particularly true for English teachers. Stories are our stock in trade. We hope that these case narratives help developing teachers learn how to use important principles in their teaching and to become more reflective practitioners. Furthermore, as McNergney et al. (1999) argue in their collection of cases, deliberation about cases moves participants away from a conception of problem solving as isolated effort toward becoming a community of thinkers trying to advance an agenda to support learners. The collaborative effort is essentially democratic: “We believe that the main values of cases is that they enable individuals to con-

nect with one another by focusing on common issues. In doing so, people learn about each other—another important benefit” (p. 13).

Selection of Cases

In selecting and developing cases, we have relied on memories of our own and others’ experiences and the witnessing of daily crises to generate a list of case topics. To narrow our choices, we have relied on research about teacher concerns. Our own research (McCann et al., 2005; McCann & Kahn, 2017) reveals that beginning teachers have serious concerns about managing classrooms, about being viewed as credible professionals by their colleagues and by parents, about being liked and accepted by students, and about being evaluated by supervisors. We know also from our own experience with general methods courses and English methods courses that preservice teachers worry about how they will grade students, how they will respond to challenges about grades, and how they will handle a monumental workload. Preservice teachers also commonly express concerns about having the freedom to put into practice the concepts and beliefs about teaching they have embraced during their college or university preparation for teaching. We expect that the case studies we have selected will allow beginning teachers to face their apprehensions and to work with others to arrive at some strategies to make the prospect of problems less intimidating.

Although the cases have been created with preservice teachers in mind, they are also a resource that can be used in mentoring early career teachers, as we have discovered in using the cases as part of professional development programs in school districts. Moreover, even the experienced practicing teachers in our graduate classes have found discussions of the cases to be valuable by encouraging them to reflect critically about their own assumptions, principles, and practices. They often describe similar situations they have faced, and their contributions tend to lead to further discussion and reflection among participants.

We have provided a variety of cases: from logistical difficulties to moral dilemmas. We have tried to avoid both the mundane and the sensational. We are left with the fairly complicated cases that a teacher could face every year. We invite readers to examine and discuss cases that present problems worth discussing—worth discussing in the sense that a teacher could benefit from thinking through the conditions and ramifications with other reasonable persons. We expect that practice with some of the cases will help teachers develop strategies and habits of thinking that will serve them in times of crisis, so that challenges remain challenges and don’t become nightmares.

Audience for This Book

The discussion and reflection about the cases in this text will support all English teachers, whether they have twenty years of experience or six months. These cases fit naturally into undergraduate and graduate preservice and in-service English education curricula. In the real world of English teaching, teachers must be prepared to handle unanticipated situations, to adapt current knowledge to deal with new problems, and to learn radically new things. In other words, English teachers must be able to deal constructively with change. To prepare English teachers to act creatively and intelligently in the classroom, preservice and in-service courses, workshops, and programs must become clinical laboratories where real teaching situations are confronted, pondered, and acted upon. Participants must have the opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

To become thoughtful and creative problem solvers, participants need practice in analyzing problems, in asking important questions, in considering a variety of responses, in arguing for or against different solutions or possible courses of action, and in seeking more than one answer to a problem. To be successful, English teachers must constantly think through problems to arrive at appropriate solutions. Donald Schön (1983) notes that teaching is a profession that invites reflection-in-action. Cases help learners understand concepts by actually experiencing them, by figuring them out for themselves, by holding them in their hands, by grappling with their nuances and subtleties, by testing solutions in an environment that encourages diverse perspectives.

Our teaching experiences and primary interests lie in the teaching of English; consequently, we have developed cases that feature situations common to English teachers. Some cases raise issues that hold special interest for English teachers. Other cases represent experiences that could confront any teacher, no matter what grade or subject. We include a case and issues matrix (see Figure I.1) so that users of this text can select those cases that have relevance and currency for their particular course of study or professional development goals. As we have noted, our experience suggests that veteran teachers, as well as early career teachers, benefit from studying cases. Problems arise in schools all the time; the problems become crises when they take teachers by surprise and they are ill-equipped to think strategically about the problems. Problems that grow unchecked have the dangerous potential to absorb time and attention, distracting the teacher from the instructional program that brings the joys and energy to our profession.

Case	6-8 Classroom*	9-12 Classroom*	Teaching Literature	Teaching Composition	Teaching Language	Censorship Challenge	Plagiarism	Managing Workload	Classroom Management	Diversity and Empathy	Balancing Work and Life	Grading and Assessment	Teacher Evaluation	Professionalism and Ethics	Critical Thinking
1. Surprise! We've Come to Complain		√	√			√			√	√					
2. Pressure Cooker		√						√			√		√		
3. Killing the Invaders		√		√					√	√					√
4. The Accu-Grade System		√								√		√			√
5. Teaching to the Test	√			√									√	√	
6. It Can't Be This Difficult	√			√	√										√
7. Out of Control		√						√		√					√
8. It's Just a Soccer Game		√							√						√
9. First Observation		√											√	√	
10. Doing the Right Thing		√													√
11. Copycat		√					√		√			√			√
12. To Think or Not to Think			√												√
13. Call Me Irreplaceable	√										√		√	√	
14. Evening Reveries		√									√				√
15. When Do They Do Grammar?	√				√										
16. Teaching English among Many Languages		√	√	√	√			√	√	√		√			
17. Teaching in the Aftermath of Trauma		√								√					√
18. Can't They Already Read?		√	√												√
19. Teacher or Technician?		√	√	√	√								√	√	
20. Isn't This Getting "Too Political"?		√	√							√			√	√	√

*Although we have designated that some cases are set in either middle grades or high school, the issues the teachers in these narratives face are ones that will concern teachers in both middle school and high school settings.

FIGURE I.1. Case and issues matrix for *On the Case in the English Language Arts Classroom*.

Format and Procedures for the Cases

This text provides narratives and an analytical framework for twenty cases. Many of the cases raise policy issues; some offer procedural challenges. With all of these cases, conversation is an essential part of the process of working toward a resolution. It is worthwhile for any teacher to recognize that in education one

functions as part of a community, and constructive solutions and policies derive from collaborative discourse.

Each case begins with a preview, which includes a summary and a series of focus questions. The case narrative and related artifacts follow. A format for discussion guides the deliberation. The discussion questions will vary with the specific needs and details of the particular case. The following examples represent the kinds of questions that will guide reflection and discussion:

- What are the central issues in the case? If there is a controversy, what are the competing sides and interests in the case?
- If the case poses a management problem, what are the particular constraints or specifications you must meet?
- If the case raises a policy question, identify the needs that must be met, or the harms that should be reduced or eliminated.
- For each possible course of action, identify the likely benefits and potential disadvantages.
- Consider how others might evaluate your actions, including the possible unintended messages and consequences.
- If applicable, identify short-term and long-term solutions to the problem. Be prepared to explain your plan in detail, as well as how the plan is likely to lead to its intended effects.
- What are the merits of each of the perspectives in the controversy?
- To what extent does the case represent a political problem? In what sense are various parties competing for limited resources?
- Can you characterize the case as a structural problem that demands the careful design of organizational structures or mechanisms? If so, how can routines or policies be adjusted to avoid problems in the future and to support learners and teachers?
- To what extent does the case require the management of symbols that can spark emotional responses?

In general, the deliberation about each case is a *comparative advantage analysis*. Since each case does not lend itself to finding a “correct answer,” perhaps the best we can do is find the best course of action among the several options available. So the deliberation process involves noting the possible responses to the problem, evaluating the potential benefits and possible disadvantages, and identifying the course of action that will likely accrue the greatest benefits and fewest disadvantages.

In some instances, facilitators might want discussants to contribute to online forums. These forums might be necessary when teachers cannot meet together, face to face; such forums can also extend a conversation that began in a classroom or meeting room. For these forums, the questions and procedures described above still apply. It would be wise for a group to collaborate in setting the norms for discussion, and a facilitator will want to specify expectations for contributions and for connecting comments to previous contributions. Such online forums are especially useful when participants write about the cases. See the examples in the final chapter of the book.

Since discussants are likely to be reading the work of educational authorities, part of the discussion could include a consideration of what these authorities might have to say about the problems exposed in the cases. For example, how would Lev Vygotsky respond to a plagiarism episode or a classroom management problem? What might John Dewey or Paulo Freire advise a teacher to do when faced with an assessment anomaly or a censorship challenge? The idea is not to find the authority-endorsed solution, but to bring these other voices into the conversation to expand thinking about possibilities.

History of the Cases

Over several years, we have used the cases in this book with preservice and practicing teachers. After using each case, we have asked the discussion participants to evaluate the case as an instructional activity. These evaluations guided us in choosing which cases to keep using and how to refine them.

We know that the cases will generate lively discussions, but what is the value of such discussion? In response to one case, a student observed, “It opened my eyes to things that teachers really have to deal with.” The users of the cases testify that the details of the cases and the discussions about them expose inexperienced teachers to many unanticipated but crucial issues, some that are seemingly mundane and pragmatic challenges, others that are moral and ethical dilemmas. Discussion participants have commonly pointed out that the deliberation about a case exposed them to some issues and potential problems they had previously been unaware of. One person reported: “I believe the thought that goes into the factors of the case study and the discussion among students afterward are both valuable to future teachers in helping them decide how they might handle similar situations.” Participants expressed a belief that the thinking they applied to a current case could transfer to new situations: “It helps you to think about the type of problem solving you will constantly be doing as a teacher and plan for some of those issues.”

Our experience in using the cases with prospective and practicing teachers suggests that the cases are powerful instruments for preparing teachers for future challenges and encouraging them to reflect on current practices.

Note to Facilitators

Deliberation about each case will be most productive if each participant initially studies the case independently. Introductory questions can guide the reading. The facilitator might find it useful to have participants discuss the case in pairs or in small groups. In this way, everyone contributes insights and suggestions. Another phase of the process involves a larger group of participants in discussion. The large-group discussion exposes multiple perspectives and a variety of possible actions.

In no instance do we offer the “correct” answer for the problems posed by a case. Involvement in the case prepares teachers to reflect on difficult issues. Instead of guiding discussion participants toward a “correct” answer, the facilitator guides them in refining analytical procedures. This means that the facilitator will ask discussants to explain, support, and project: Why does someone make a particular claim? What are the logical consequences connected to taking certain actions? Are there any exceptions to one’s generalizations? Does a proposal stand up to tests under particular circumstances? Who would disagree? What are the merits and shortcomings of the opposing views?

Sometimes discussion will be frustrating because some issues are so elusive and contentious that they do not permit satisfying solutions. Also, as sometimes occurs on the job, deliberation can end abruptly when a situation requires immediate action. In the end, explorers of the cases should recognize that this text provides no answer key. Some discussants will find it frustrating that a recognizable correct answer eludes them, and when this happens it will be difficult for the facilitator to bring a discussion to closure. Instead of pursuing correct answers as an end product, discussion leaders should look for reasonable analyses and the expression of strategic plans for confronting similar situations in the future.

Typically, a person who facilitates discussion about a case study follows these practices: (a) Allow the discussion participants time to prepare to discuss the case. In their preparation, participants might find it productive to identify several possible courses of action, predict the likely result for each course of action, and weigh the benefits and disadvantages of each choice. (b) As the discussion begins and progresses, rely on frequent paraphrases of participants’ remarks, while avoiding evaluative comments. The other participants are likely to provide the challenges and evaluative comments to prompt a discussant to

develop thought further. (c) Invite other participants to evaluate the analysis of previous speakers. (d) Press participants to be logical by posing appropriate follow-up questions: Why do you say that? What does that mean? How does that information support your claim? (e) Recognize that time constraints will dictate the necessity to bring a discussion to closure. In the end, the facilitator looks for evidence that participants have thought critically and strategically, in the sense that they have entertained multiple ways of looking at the problem and have made evaluative judgments about the most reasonable, ethical, and efficacious course of action. The facilitator can then summarize the essence of the discussion and perhaps prompt a written response or further research and writing.

Post-discussion Products

There are two obvious possibilities for post-discussion products. Some groups who work with a case might choose to play out the drama of the situation. After some preparation, the participants engage in role-playing to see how the proposed solutions would work: for example, enact a meeting with a disgruntled parent; engage colleagues about a new approach to the teaching of reading. In some instances, the case will invite a written response. The specific case will suggest the form and audience for the writing. In either case, taking some action after the discussion extends understanding of the controversy and allows participants to project the likely consequences for their decisions. In addition, a group might find that a case simply introduces the core of a complex issue, and some preservice teachers might wish to research the issue further and share findings with colleagues. Throughout the book, we suggest such research directions.

Writing Your Own Cases

The twenty cases highlighted in this book cannot account for the many difficult and frustrating situations that could emerge in a school every year. The instructor and other discussion participants who use this book might discover that they would like to write a case of their own and present it to colleagues for examination and analysis. Experience tells us that a case that stimulates meaningful discussion and promotes analytical thinking will have some key features. The last chapter of the book identifies these important features as a framework for producing new cases that are not represented in the current text.

Surprise! We've Come to Complain

*P*review: How should teachers respond to parents' challenges about the literature that teachers require their students to read? This case asks the reader to consider whether some challenges have any merit and legitimacy. Is it dangerous to allow a potential censor to have any influence? In the following case, a relatively inexperienced teacher faces parents' complaints about certain required reading. The teacher must prepare for a meeting with the parents and decide how to work with the student who might feel uncomfortable with the current reading.

Focus Questions: (1) What planning should the teacher do for a meeting with parents who are voicing a complaint about the selection of literature? (2) How should the teacher treat the complaint and respond to the parents and to the student?

The Case: Surprise! We've Come to Complain

Lauren Saplin arrived at school early one Monday morning during her second year of teaching so that she could finish some preparation before her first period class. She had intended to put books on the desks and prepare a simple presentation slide with the directions for an activity her students would be doing during the first period class. Lauren estimated that she would be able to complete her preparations and still have time to use the washroom before she had to teach two classes in a row. But approximately thirty minutes before the first period bell, when Lauren entered the main office of the school, the administrative assistant noted that two parents were waiting to speak to her. Lauren thought, "Oh, no! I hope I didn't forget an appointment with someone's parents."

Lauren approached in her usual courteous manner: "Can I help you?"

"Are you Ms. Saplin?" the man asked. "I'm Oliver Carstead, and this is my wife, Amelia. Our daughter Louise is in your English class. If you have a couple

of minutes, we'd like to talk to you about the reading you have assigned for your class."

"My first period class meets soon," said Lauren, "but I can give you a few minutes now. Come on in." Fortunately, the administrative conference room was available, so they slipped in there to talk.

After Mr. and Mrs. Carstead sat down, they told Lauren emphatically that they objected to her selection of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* as assigned reading in a ninth-grade class. Mr. Carstead took the lead in describing his disgust at the inclusion of profanities in the book. He opened a copy of the text and pointed to such words and phrases as *bastard*, *crap*, and *son of a bitch*. He also expressed concern that his daughter was exposed to the use of the "Lord's name in vain." Mr. Carstead showed Lauren instances in the text where characters uttered as expletives the words *Jesus* and *God damn*. The parents agreed that the most objectionable language of all was the repeated use of a racial slur, and pointed to several appearances of a most disturbing word in the text. Mr.

The parents agreed that the most objectionable language of all was the repeated use of a racial slur, and pointed to several appearances of a most disturbing word in the text.

Carstead noted that his daughter Louise was the only African American student in the class, and he understood that it was Ms. Saplin's practice to read several passages from the novel aloud during her lessons. Mr. Carstead appeared to Lauren to be quite agitated when he described his concern that his daughter would be the object of curiosity, unwanted solicitude, or perhaps derision as the students read these offensive passages aloud in class. Mr. Carstead noted that he hadn't read the entire book, but claimed that representative pages told him the nature and quality of the entire text.

Lauren explained that she had some flexibility in selecting material for her class and that she had selected *Of Mice and Men* because she believed that it taught students important lessons about friendship and alienation. She explained further that it was her hope that the reading and the discussing of the novel would serve as a tool to fight race prejudice and hatred.

The minutes ticked away until Lauren had to point out that her first period class was about to begin. Mr. and Mrs. Carstead noted, "We are by no means done with this matter. We want to know what you are going to do about exposing children to this offensive book, and we want to know what you are going to do in regard to our daughter."

The first period bell was about to ring when Lauren agreed to meet with the Carsteads after school the next day. Of course, it was a little difficult to concentrate on the lesson at hand after this encounter. A number of questions and con-

siderations came to mind: How would she defend to the Carsteads her use of the novel in question and convince them that it has some merit as a literary work? Should she bring other people to the meeting or meet with the Carsteads alone? How should she treat Louise Carstead? Lauren recalled that Louise had commented in class that she had already completed the reading of the novel. In some sense, then, the Carsteads' challenge seemed too late, and there seemed to be nothing that Lauren could do now. If Lauren were to excuse Louise from any lessons related to the novel, the separation would surely call attention to the girl and make her feel more uncomfortable. If Louise were excused from the current lessons, what would she do while the other students worked with the novel? Lauren tried to remember how she had introduced the novel. She couldn't recall if she had warned the students about the language. How could she explain to the parents and her supervisors the fact that she had exposed students to profanities and to offensive racial slurs without warning them?

If you were in Lauren Saplin's position, what would you do? What would you do when you saw Louise Carstead in your afternoon class? What would you do in preparation for tomorrow's meeting? What provisions or policy changes, if any, would you make in the future?

"We are by no means done with this matter. We want to know what you are going to do about exposing children to this offensive book, and we want to know what you are going to do in regard to our daughter."

Questions for Discussion

1. If Lauren has made any errors in the selection of the text, in reading parts out loud in class, or in requiring that everyone read it, where is she at fault? If you think she is not at fault, how would you explain this to the parents?
2. Is there anything that Lauren can do to ease Louise's discomfort in the class? Should Lauren make any exceptions for Louise? Why?
3. How can Lauren justify requiring her students to read a book that contains profanities and racial slurs?
4. To what extent would it benefit Lauren to include other persons besides the Carsteads at their meeting? Should she involve other persons, whether or not they actually attend the meeting? Who would she involve, and why?

5. What do you expect will occur at the meeting? What do you think the parents want? What concessions, if any, do you think Lauren should be willing to make?
6. What would you recommend as Lauren's plan for the next twenty-four hours? What are the projected benefits and possible disadvantages of your plan?
7. In the long term, what would you recommend that Lauren do? What would be the benefits to this long-term plan? In the end, what disadvantages can you predict will result from your plan? How can you show that, on balance, your recommended course of action will probably result in more benefits than problems?

Related Research and Writing

Research one of the following topics and share your findings with your classmates or colleagues.

1. Consult publications from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) or the American Library Association (ALA) to learn which books are most often challenged. What are the most common bases for the challenges? What help can NCTE and ALA provide for teachers and librarians who wish to include some of the challenged titles as part of the literature curriculum or the school collection?
2. Read about one case of a censorship challenge in a school in your area or in the area where you hope to work in the future. What was the nature of the challenge? How did the teacher or the school respond to the challenge? What were some of the emotional aspects of the case? What was the final outcome? What did the whole episode reveal about mistakes and reasonable policies?
3. From a list of commonly challenged books, identify one work that you might find yourself teaching in the future. Expect a challenge to your use of the book. What would be the likely arguments against your using the book? How would you respond to the challenges? What provisions could you make in your class and with the school administration so that any censorship challenge does not escalate into a large-scale controversy?

Being a high school English teacher is both rewarding and difficult. Although teacher education programs try to be thorough, they can't prepare preservice teachers for every situation that might arise. For instance:

- How can an ELA teacher work with learners who have suffered significant trauma?
- How can a well-prepared literature instructor teach high school students the basics of reading?
- Should a teacher shy away from classroom conversations because they can become “too political”?
- How does a teacher contend with a crushing workload?

These are just a few of the issues ELA teachers face every day, but *On the Case in the English Language Arts Classroom* provides teachers at any point in their career the opportunity to analyze potential situations and problems that commonly confront teachers through case studies that prompt extensive, stimulating discussion and invite written responses.

Four veteran teacher educators offer twenty case narratives as well as a format for discussion, professional resources that can inform decisions, and a guide to constructing new case narratives that can expand the possibilities for developing powerful problem-solving strategies.

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