

Have Case, Will Travel: Taking Political Science On (and Off) the Road

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As my students admired the sparkling icebergs towering around us, I sensed a unique opportunity to connect the emotive and the cerebral sides of our research project.¹ Looking at the glistening surface of a pristine Alaskan bay, I ventured, “Now imagine this place under three feet of crude oil.” The looks of disbelief gave way to a collective groan, then a moment of sulky silence followed by an explosion of discussion. The actual arguments were less important than the sudden insight that made this teacher very happy: my students really *cared* about the subject of the class, the long-term impact of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill on the human habitat.

“Having fun” is certainly overrated as an educational device. Yet, there is little doubt that a student alienated, bored, or anguished by a course is unlikely to achieve the desired educational goals or to meet the teacher’s expectations for class participation or quality of research papers. The following observations stem from a course that eliminates such problems by providing a focused research activity in a stimulating environment. I shall call it “a traveling case study.”

The advantages of the case method in teaching and research are well known (see, for example, Johnson, Joslyn, and Reynolds 2001; Lynn 1999; Taylor 1994; Van Evera 1997; Velenchik 1995; Wasserman 1994). I will elaborate on its pedagogical benefits later in this article but first let me briefly introduce the course and its founding philosophy.

I sought to make this case study directly relevant to my students’ interests and life experiences. However, I realized the issues of environmental policy making or grassroots community organizing in Alaska would be relatively alien to my class, a fairly typical group of liberal arts college students in the Midwest. So I endeavored to

deliver the experience *to* them. Or, more precisely, I tried to deliver the students *to* the experience. For that, I found a traveling course format very useful. I am quite fortunate that my college is very supportive of such classes and even sets aside a month in the spring for courses that “cross geographic, cultural, or disciplinary boundaries.” As most schools allow or even encourage traveling courses of some sort, you may find the following remarks useful.

Perhaps there is no need to convince political scientists of the merits of studying the murder of JFK at Daley Plaza, analyzing the Chinese economy in Beijing, or discussing the decision to enlarge NATO with its officials in Brussels. But it is important to avoid the trap (and even trappings) of a merely “experiential” traveling course. This may appear obvious to the readers of *PS*, but our students *are* bombarded with colorful posters from various institutions whose course ads imply, perhaps unwittingly, that simply by crossing a desert or living in a city one will learn all about life. A traveling case study cannot be just a sight-seeing trip, and we must introduce the research component early and emphasize it daily. Let me elaborate on this point by briefly discussing my experiences.

The Course

The course focused on the social and political developments resulting from the Exxon Valdez disaster, especially on:

- the local communities organizing for survival and fighting back,
- citizen advisory and monitoring bodies that sprang up in the wake of the spill (and often are financed from the settlement fines by Exxon),
- issues of corporate responsibility, and
- the governmental response at the federal, state, and local levels.

The schedule included a preliminary period to research these issues followed by a weeklong substantive and

travel preparation on campus, a two-week trip to Alaska, and a final one-week session back on campus. In Alaska, the group spent about a week in Anchorage meeting with local authorities, grassroots activists, and representatives of citizen organizations monitoring the effects of the spill and involved in disaster prevention programs. Then we traveled to Prince William Sound to meet local activists, fishermen, and other residents of Valdez and Cordova to investigate the economic and social impact of the spill. We also went to a remote Alaska Native village that still relies on subsistence fishing, visited the southern terminal of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, and collected additional data for term papers. The travel to Prince William Sound, including the exploration of the area where the spill occurred, was designed to increase the students’ appreciation for the interconnectedness of the environmental, economic, and political concerns. The icing on the cake was a four-day wilderness kayaking trip that highlighted the sheer beauty of the endangered habitat.

Course Requirements and Assessment of Results

I designed the assignments for this full-load four-credit course to address my foremost concern: that it be scholarly in character and educational in outcome. I found that students were willing to start their research projects quite early, even a few weeks before the term began. This gave them the necessary preparation time for solid in-class oral presentations as well as key 15-page term papers. The former was particularly important, since time constraints would not have allowed us to begin working on quality presentations until after the first class session (without the extra time students would have had only one week for research on campus). Most students made their presentations during the five 2.5-hour classes before we left campus, so the exercise served as an introduction to various ecological, social, economic, and political aspects of the case.

The term papers, each on a topic students chose from a list I compiled,

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were edited and grouped according to their major themes and then desktop-published as a bound collection. The topics ranged from the legal and political ramifications of the spill to the impact on the Alaska Natives and the economy of the region, to grass-roots environmental activism and ecological restoration efforts.

Thus, the papers complemented one another and established a logical flow of chapters to achieve a coherent and powerful study. Such publications could contribute to the overall success of *any* class, but a case-based course simply cries for a permanent presentation of the findings, preferably in a book format. By seeing their names “in print,” students gain a sense of purpose and accomplishment, and their work is no longer limited to their professor’s perusal. Its publication is a source of pride; they can show it to family, friends, and perhaps prospective employers. Remarkably, some authors asked to be allowed to do additional editing because they did not want to disappoint their sources and would-be readers: the officials and activists whom we had interviewed in Alaska. Our volume received positive reviews from this audience, which only increased the sense of efficacy and achievement among the students.

I selected readings that would allow us to utilize the logical progression of the case: master the details, appreciate the context, and then reflect on more abstract, general lessons you can learn from the case. Thus, besides their specific paper-related sources, all students read an excellent account of the events and circumstances of the Exxon Valdez oil spill and its aftermath (Keeble 1999), a solid introduction to Alaska public policy issues (Thomas 1999), and a third, rather less typical book. This non-fiction story about the diverging life paths of a rocket scientist and his survivalist son (Brower 1978) forces readers to ponder our impact on the Earth and civilization, thus provoking more general theoretical reflections on ecology and sustainability, well-suited topics for the course.

In addition to the presentations and the research paper, my assessment of

outcomes included class participation and research journals. I insisted that the journals relate specifically to research findings pertinent to the topics. Besides reviews of scholarly articles, journal en-



On the Road. A traveling case study allows the instructor to deliver the students to the experience. Photo: istockphoto.com/Tracy Tucker.

tries included reflections on the numerous meetings and group interviews we conducted. This way, I managed to avoid an obvious risk: the attractive trip might tempt students to turn in travelogues instead of research reports.

Selection Process

Determining the right size and composition of the group can be a harrowing but also rewarding exercise. Not surprisingly, a traveling case study’s success depends, among others, on your ability to travel. You may have no say as to the number or type of students who can enroll in your class. But if you do, it is useful to run a simple mental simulation to try to predict likely obstacles. Those could range from the rules of various hotels to campground policies to emergencies to building accessibility for the handicapped. In some cases, they may even include the capacity and tonnage of a fishing vessel, such as the one that delivered my class to a remote Alaska Native village.

I could only take 12 students, to be selected from over 40 candidates who attended an informational session. I was realistic enough to acknowledge that Alaska would be a magnet to all sorts of people for all kinds of reasons. Facing the need to select the “right” ones from that enthusiastic crowd, I put aca-

demics before travel savvy. Each candidate’s grade point average had to be at least equivalent to a “B.” This by itself could not guarantee a high intellectual standing, yet it increased my chances of choosing good students who focused on academics.

Why choose 12 participants? While there is some time-honored mystique associated with this number, my decision was purely utilitarian. A group of 12 could most easily be divided and accommodated in either double or triple hotel rooms, in two-, three-, or four-person tents, and in double-seat sea kayaks. Since our trip included a wilderness camping component, a larger group would have found it more difficult to locate an appropriate tent site, not to mention maintaining our “leave-no-trace” camping policy. At the same time, the group

was big enough to qualify for many discounted rates throughout the trip.

All candidates filled out a detailed questionnaire that turned out to be a valuable selection tool. It gave me the first glance at my students’ personalities, academic background, and outdoor experiences. In addition to answering some specific questions, students had a chance to explain in a short essay why they would be “valuable additions to the group.” Somewhat to my surprise, this simple exercise revealed a lot about individual motivations and suitability for good teamwork. Additional meetings with students further clarified our mutual expectations and helped me make the final selection.

Such decisions are of consequence. A group of young people on the road can be a dynamic team or a ticking time bomb. Empowering students to become real contributors and decision-makers greatly helps in encouraging the former and avoiding the latter. I like to give my students a chance to impress me. In a traveling case study course there are enough arrangements, projects, and details to divide among all participants. For example, my students organized sub-teams to arrange for supplies, camping gear, first-aid kits, some transportation, etc. They commented afterward that their sense of accomplishment and engagement in the course matter had increased as a

result of their direct involvement in such class-related decisions and arrangements.

Mental Notes

Every instructor's situation differs somewhat, and I am hesitant to try to push too many unsolicited pieces of advice. However, let me share a few simple organizational rules that have served me well so far.

1. Plan early

This advice never ages, but it is absolutely crucial for a traveling case course. Start working on the course design about a year in advance. For one, this gives you a chance to appreciate the complexity of the case and to investigate it by yourself. You may not use all the data for the course, but the research will give you plenty of references, suggestions for your students, and especially connections to the people your group will be interviewing. When possible, visit the sites before going on the trip with your students. I found that going to Alaska a year before the course greatly helped me organize the logistics and research program for the class. Starting early will also help you utilize institutional support mechanisms and accomplish the following steps.

2. Line up the best contacts you can

This may be one of the most attractive aspects of the course since the students travel to the sources and hope to meet and interview the participants, observers, scholars, or practitioners concerned with the case. Such encounters yield a variety of perspectives and help the students gain a broad understanding of relevant issues. Locating the best individuals through the Internet, telephone directories, corporate listings, or personal references may require a lot of patience and ingenuity. You may be pleasantly surprised, though, to find that even those reclusive activists or officials who shun the media spotlight may make an exception for a group of students involved in a serious project.

3. Become your own travel agent or use a good one

Some of the arrangements for the course may be rather unusual and may test the patience or resources of a travel agent. Depending on your specific program, you may need to make reserva-

tions for several hotels, a youth hostel, a campus dormitory, a ferry, or hire a guide and rent some camping equipment or a 15-passenger van. While a very friendly travel agent may take on such an assignment, chances are that you will be left to your own devices. So, plan ahead and do your best. For example, I

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never fail to inquire about group rates. Various places—theaters, airlines, hotels—offer significant discounts to groups, and college students may be eligible for additional deductions. Major airlines have special desks specializing in group travel. Smaller hotels may negotiate prices. Eligibility provisions will vary, of course: while my 12-person class received discounts just about anywhere, the Alaska Railroad required at least 20 people for a group rate. Once you have agreed on the rate being offered, always write down the name of the person taking reservations and request a written confirmation of the arrangement.

4. Be patient

Despite my best intentions, I found that starting early does not mean *being* ready early. So be patient—some arrangements will *have to* wait until the last minute. For example, booking a 15-passenger van in Alaska more than six months in advance is virtually impossible since the rental companies do not know when in the season those special vehicles will arrive from “the lower 48” states. Similarly, it was clear that Native villagers would not accept uninvited visitors. However, getting through to their leaders took me several months of unsuccessful calling, faxing, and trying to locate anyone who could help me to get an invitation. I was elated to get an indirect confirmation that we could come—barely a week before our departure for Alaska.²

5. Handle the money with care

You are using someone else's money, and this dictates utmost care and re-

sponsibility. Keep meticulous financial records. This will allow you to keep tabs on your (sometimes sizeable) budget. It will also endear you to your school's financial authorities that value accountability. Students must pay their course fees, if any, through the bursar's office, not directly to the instructor. You need to make appropriate arrangements either for receiving an advance before your departure or for reimbursement of expenses after your return. Some schools offer corporate credit cards, which could be a convenient method of payment and record-keeping. In other cases, you may have to combine the use of your personal credit card (check the limits!), travelers checks, and cash. The right combination of those methods will depend on your destination. You will be surprised to discover how many establishments off the beaten track accept various credit cards but also how many still do not.

6. Follow up

Now that you have invested so much time and effort into building a good case, extend its usefulness. Maintain contact with the individuals your class met. When feasible, invite some of them to campus to allow the whole community to share in the findings and excitement your course generated among your students. Regular contacts throughout the year can lead to joint research projects, summer internships for your students, and strengthened connections to the “real world,” always an attractive prospect for the academia.

Why Use the Case Method?

It is that connection to the real world that has made the case method popular. Pioneered by Harvard Law School in the late nineteenth century, by the 1920s the case method spread to Harvard Business School and then other business schools (Lynn 1999, 3) where now it often accounts for some 80% of all teaching. As the popularity of case-based learning broadened, the method has also been implemented in studying accounting, medicine, architecture, ethics, and other disciplines. In political science, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government became the leading promoter of case studies in public policy and management, offering over 1,800 cases and notes for classroom use (JFK SG 2002). Other institutions, notably the Pew Charitable Trusts, also

help advance the method among college and university faculty.

In short, the case method provides an in-depth analysis of an event or a phenomenon using a variety of tools and approaches. Moreover, it provides the opportunity to investigate an issue in its natural complexity of interrelated factors and problems rather than in abstract form. Students investigate a real-life problem, often taking on roles of specific decision-makers. Then they present their perspectives in a discussion or papers and explore a variety of solutions. Individual ideas clash; creativity and analytical skills are put to a test. The educational process emphasizes intensive class interaction and mutual learning rather than teacher-centered lecturing.

At the same time, by writing individual papers my students gained an additional pedagogical benefit since the research process (a “research case” with which many of us are familiar) helped solidify the “case study learning” process. Together with the assigned readings about the case, students had to spend enough time and effort on their own research work to ensure that they were knowledgeable to the extent needed for the method to succeed. They also created their own collective case material, useful for research and teaching purposes.

The resulting account offers unmatched detail that is a true foundation for comparative work, either in its rigorous “hard” version or in the “thick description” method perfected by Clifford Geertz (1957). At the same time, a well-applied case allows students to examine details of a problem and then to progress toward some generalizations to address the question: of what is this an example? Participants are forced to shed some easy platitudes or overly abstract notions, like being “pro-environment” or “pro-business.” They gradually climb

the rungs of the ladder of abstraction from primary data obtained directly at the source to a better understanding of interdependent factors involved in the case, all the way to developing their intellectual positions or theoretical explanations.

Consider, for instance, the case of *The Starship and the Canoe* mentioned above, the third required reading for the course. At first, most students confessed, the book appeared to have little to do with the theme of the course. Gradually they realized that the clash of opinions and lifestyles that characterized both the scientist and his son was emblematic of the students’ own ecological and lifestyle choices. For example, they could not help noticing the irony that their often-critical assessments of oil companies and oil dependence occurred as we rode in fossil fuel-propelled vans and ships. All admitted that while they admired the “back to nature” philosophy as a way to solve ecological problems, none would be willing to give up their motor vehicles in favor of kayaks. And so, as the case study exposed them to the potential impact of private citizens on policy making and to the ramifications of their own consumption patterns, my students climbed the ladder of abstraction to question their and their society’s biases, resource utilization, and the feasibility of grassroots collective action to effect any change.

While on the road, the visits of invited guests also allow you to maximize the advantages of the case method. Students benefit from meeting specialists from various disciplines. In my case, we talked with several marine biologists, a marine toxicologist, a Native environmentalist, a former mayor of Valdez, several former state and federal officials, Coast Guard officers, two premier naturalists, and a group of experts monitoring the environmental im-

pact of oil shipping, in addition to a plethora of local residents from every walk of life. This remarkable collection of knowledgeable individuals gave my students the many benefits of a team-taught class, especially the quality cross-disciplinary exposure and a range of perspectives. Moreover, the guests were all directly involved in the events and problems the class had been studying. This kind of first-hand experience really appealed to the students and would have been difficult to tap into without traveling to the sources.

Conclusions

A traveling case study is not for everybody. For one, you need to be able to make many arrangements usually reserved for a travel agent. You also must like traveling yourself. After all, a frustrated instructor will be as weak a link in the educational process as a frustrated student. In some cases, you may have to be able to plan camping trips with all related contingencies. And, sometimes, even be ready to sleep on the ground.

But the rewards are plentiful. There are *many* classrooms in the world, and some of the most intriguing educational opportunities may await beyond the confines of our campuses. Students get highly involved in the study through the numerous personal connections, both intellectual and emotional, they develop with the topic. It would be difficult for them not to feel passionate about an investigation they *live through* every day in the company of their peers. Besides, they apply and test theoretical perspectives they learned in the classroom to real problems and people they encounter. These confrontations give students a powerful appreciation for the importance of scientific research and the relevance of their own studies.

Need I say more? Happy trails!

Notes

1. I would like to thank Burnet Davis, Ute Stargardt, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version

of this paper.

2. Our sensitivity to local preferences paid off. While a few boat operators who helped us

reach the remote village were forthrightly asked to leave the place, our group was finally granted an interview.

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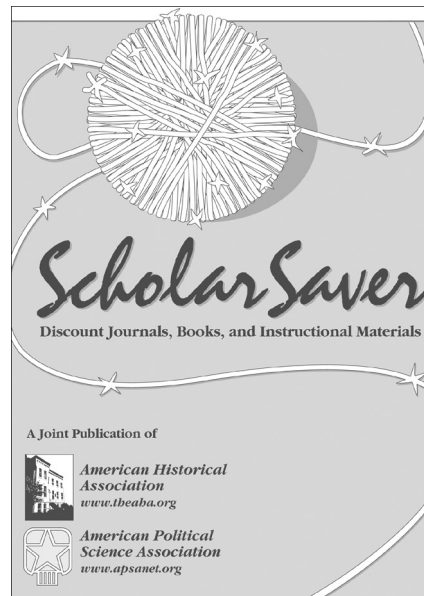
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