For the past 2 years, I have been instructing a web-based course in management research through Nipissing University. I have witnessed the inherent skills and experience of students, who strive to connect these experiences in a meaningful way to solve real-world problems. One advantage of management education is the ample opportunity provided to link theory and concepts to practice through real-world cases and examples. I am especially interested in critical approaches to learning in order to challenge conventional wisdom and traditional. I use critical to mean adopting a skeptical view of tradition and authority: management knowledge is problematized, and questions are raised about how theory may privilege a singular, functionalist view of the world (Mingers, 2000). The question, then, is how to operationalize this learning for critical management education. I believe strongly in the use of the case study as it takes multiple perspectives into consideration. My approach to case study education follows Yin (1993) and Stake (1995) by adopting an explanatory, instrumental method: the narrative, reference materials, and discussion questions are used to explain the causes of the failures and successes of management decision and action to encourage students to understand more than what is obvious.

By being immersed in a problem for which students may not have the tools to solve, they are motivated to seek out theory that can solve the problem (Volpe, 2007). In addition, by incorporating a critical approach, the intention is to demonstrate that theory does not neatly tie up the problem: there are always unintended consequences and differing contexts that alter the results of applying the same theoretical approach. In other words, the case will problematize management knowledge (Mingers, 2000) at the same time that it introduces students to that knowledge.

Furthermore, Mingers (2000) suggests that students’ own experience should form the starting point for critical management education. It may be surprising to instructors to learn that many students have a great deal of lived experience. Therefore, in the introductory component of the case, students should be encouraged to share their experiences. This should serve as further motivation to learn theory. To avoid having students see examples as merely instances of theory application, my approach to teaching emphasizes seeing beyond theory identification so that the issues raised by applying the theory are included for consideration (Volpe, 2007). In other words, the goal of management education in a critical approach should be to foster the identification of theory, but also to have students see the implications of their choices.

The material in a standard undergraduate organizational behaviour textbook should provide students using this case with sufficient theoretical. However, unlike lecture-based teaching using the textbook as a reference, my approach requires students to use ambiguous evidence to solve problems (Volpe, 2007). Again, the critical component of the case will challenge students to identify the limitations of theory, as well as the consequences of applying theory to those outside of the organizations empowered to make decisions. In my case study approach, the use of raw evidence simulates for
students the ambiguity and chaos that normally confront decision makers, policy analysts, or managers.

Volpe (2007) provides further evidence of the useful intersection between case studies and management education when he suggests that the social and political context of events serve as a useful dividing line between theory and practice. The case study confronts students with the context of a problem and in so doing incorporates a key element of the critical approach to management.

In summary, I attempt wherever possible to adopt the case approach to learning. Cases can illustrate lectures through a presentation of the problems encountered by managers. Short excerpts from magazines and newspapers in addition to on-line video and website archives can be used to introduce the issues and develop analytical skills in students. Further, the case can be used to show the messy, ambiguous and uncertain choices faced by decision makers, but also by those affected by decision makers’ choices. Students will need to take the ambiguous situations of the case and will be asked to present their solutions to the dilemmas. Normal lectures can be complemented with this approach in which students will compare their decisions, and learn from each other.

REFERENCES


