

An Introduction to Case Study

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There is a Japanese visual art in which the artist is forced to be spontaneous. He must paint on a thin stretched parchment with a special brush and black water paint in such a way that an unnatural or interrupted stroke will destroy the line or break through the parchment. Erasures or changes are impossible. These artists must practice a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere.

The resulting pictures lack the complex composition and textures of ordinary painting, but it is said that those who see well find something captured that escapes explanation.

This conviction that direct deed is the most meaningful reflections, I believe, has prompted the evolution of the extremely severe and unique disciplines of the jazz or improvising musician.

Group improvisation is a further challenge. Aside from the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result. This most difficult problem, I think, is beautifully met and solved on this recording.

As the painter needs his framework of parchment, the improvising musical group needs its framework in time. Miles Davis presents here frameworks which are exquisite in their simplicity and yet contain all that is necessary to stimulate performance with sure reference to the primary conception.

Miles conceived these settings only hours before the recording dates and arrived with sketches which indicated to the group what was to be played. Therefore, you will hear something close to pure spontaneity in these performances. The group had never played these pieces prior to the recordings and I think without exception the first complete performance of each was a "take."

So wrote Bill Evans in the original recording sleeve notes of Miles Davis' classic album *Kind of Blue*. The album featured Evan's piano playing, as well as legendary jazz musicians such as John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderly, Paul Chambers and Jimmy Cobb. It is a marvel in the history of improvised music and is still the best-selling jazz album of all time. For many, including myself, it is the most beloved.

Jazz is a useful metaphor for qualitative research and case study, as a subset of this. Evans (and Davis) reflect on the nature of group improvisation. It has certain key features:

Spontaneity and discipline

Evans writes of a spontaneity within the Japanese art form. This artform is a closely defined discipline with a range of associated practices and philosophies. Yet what one might see as the limitations or boundaries of the practice become the framework within which the skilful artist produces something of great beauty.

Fragility

The fragility of this artistic practice is quickly apparent. The permanence of the recording means that erasure and change are not an option for the artist. They have to work on a fragile surface of parchment with a highly developed sensitivity and control of movement.

Direct communication

There is a focussed and directed communication between the artist and the listener. Rattle's live recordings (e.g. Mahler 5) have won much praise and adulation from the critics for their spontaneity, vibrancy and directness of expression. Maybe there is an increasing dissatisfaction with the heavily processed and edited studio-based recordings that dominate recording catalogues. Similarly, in *Kind of Blue* Miles Davis has managed to capture the immediacy, of an improvised performance in a way that has seldom been repeated by other jazz artists. The directness of the communication is the source of reflection for the immediate participants in the recording and every subsequent listener since.

'Seeing well'

Those that 'see well' will find something that exceeds their expectation (and may well defy out attempts to 'capture' it through reporting it to others). The process of 'meaning making' is a difficult one and intrinsically personal, although it can be shared and negotiated with others. Seeing well involves the whole person; it is felt as well as thought.

Group collaboration

What marks this album out from others is the collective nature and thinking of the various musicians. These jazz musicians have sophisticated musical skills, yet it is aspects of their humanness that shine through. Characteristics such as sympathy, empathy, reflection and appreciation of the role of others, and an awareness of one's shifting role and importance in changing contexts are just as vital here.

Simple frameworks stimulate imaginations

Evans writes about the 'sketches' and 'settings' that Davis brought to the recording session. In this artform, as in many others, creativity and spontaneity are not freak, decontextualised processes. There is a process of outworking from a simple framework that leads to the final product. The quality and simplicity of Davis' initial ideas were a key factor in the production of the album.

Group improvisation is a rarified artform. Such exquisite examples as *Kind of Blue* are few in number and rightly cherished.

Definitions

An interesting perspective quoted by Saville Kushner (p.5). Early proponents of case study in 1972 produced the following 'manifesto':

Case study should be:

- Responsive to the needs and perspectives of different audiences;
- Illuminative of the complex organizational, teaching and learning processes at issue;
- Relevant to public and professional decisions forthcoming; and
- Reported in a language which is accessible to [their] audiences.

Two key definitions

Stenhouse:

Case study methods involve the collection and recording of data about a case or cases, and the preparation of a report or a presentation of the case. (p.49)

Stake:

Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances. (p. xi)

So, case study is characterized by:

- Particularity (a case or cases)
- Collecting and recording data
- Reporting and presenting the findings
- Contextual understanding
- Being responsive
- Illuminating complex issues at work

- Relevance
- Accessibility

Defining the Boundaries: A case study of what?

Perhaps the most important question. This will define what follows. Could be persons (pupil/teacher), initiatives, classes, etc.

The case is a specific, a complex, functioning thing. (Stake, p.2)

Dunwich Revisited was such a case.

- A curriculum project – innovative and exciting;
- Reflected a range of personal issues, ideas and opinions (see below) and other contexts
- Range of classes at the outset narrowing down to a small group of pupils;
- Within the overall ‘case’, smaller cases emerged as the project developed;
- Choices needed to be made about case issues and other practicalities;
- Reflection on choices become an important part of the case record (and of the action research spiral).

Backgrounds Matter

A thorough examination of background of the case’s context and your reasons for studying it are also vital.

Case should be chosen to maximise what one can learn from it. Developing understanding, promoting assertions and maybe modifying generalisations (Stake, p.4).

Dunwich Revisited was designed as a curriculum experiment in a particular school at a specific time. The background to my choosing of a ‘case’ included a number of issues that I had identified and reflected on:

- Criticism of Government initiatives for ICT in music education and other curriculum documentation;
- Reflection on wider uses of ICT in music particularly the practices and processes of a particular type of music/ICT – electroacoustic music
- Desire to link together pupils’ musical experiences in meaningful ways (inside and outside the school boundary);
- Personal beliefs about the value of environment as a source for compositional work;
- Engaging relationships with our key members of staff within the school;
- Immediate research context linked to professional development

Case Study Techniques

Many possibilities here.

Stake describes one potential outline for field study (pp.52-3). Comprises of:

1. Anticipation
2. First Visit
3. Further Preparation for Observation
4. Further Development of Conceptualisation
5. Gather Data, Validate Data
6. Analysis of Data
7. Providing Audience Opportunity for Understanding

Observation and interview are key devices. But other things are important, including contextual descriptions and document analysis.

Dunwich Revisited used a range of techniques, with interview (individual and group) and observation being most important. A number of questionnaires were also sent out to pupils.

Describe recent research that draws on case study: composer case studies; video based data gathering; reflections on practice through video to establish critical incidents and develop further discussions.

Using an action research methodology seemed appropriate for me. This was based on my view of the traditions of UEA, access to staff in the School of Education with their expertise and my prior knowledge of Somekh's work in this area.

Your Role in a Case Study

Stake talks about the multiple roles of a case study researcher:

- Teacher
- Advocate
- Evaluator
- Biographer
- Interpreter

One can wear many hats simultaneously and they can coexist quite happily!

For me, a key consideration was how I ought to define my own identity through the teaching/research activity. As a teacher researcher (using an action research pedagogy) this was pre-eminent. But I also find myself in the role of evaluator and biographer.

In considering this now, I found Bruner's idea of a 'folk pedagogy' most helpful. Bruner defines these as 'everyday intuitive theories about how other minds work' (p.45). These have seldom been articulated fully. Within education they have profound effects:

In theorizing about the practice of education in the classroom (or any other situation for that matter), you had better take into account the folk theories that those engaged in teaching and learning already have. For any innovations that you may wish to introduce will have to compete with, replace, or otherwise modify the folk theories that already guide both teachers and pupils. (p.46)

So for me, as a teacher and researcher, case study should primarily be about, as Gardner puts it:

Placing ourselves inside the heads of our students and trying to understand as far as possible the sources and strengths of their conceptions. (p.49)

Within the practice of musical composition this is a real challenge! It's not easily explainable, often private and full of competing ideologies and assumptions.

Generating Knowledge

How do case studies generate knowledge?

1. Communicative validity

'Those reading the case will be able to decide for themselves – through the communication between writer and reader – if the knowledge will be useful for them.'

This places a huge responsibility in the act of reporting on the case study via the case record. See problems below.

2. Comparative validity

'Assembling a bank of case studies that can be drawn on as exemplars or models to inform practice'.

Key notion here of communicating and sharing ideas. Teachers seldom have time for this! BPRS was an attempt to do this.

3. Commonalities in case design

Larger scale formal design.

PhD research followed this pattern (early experiments – DR – RO)

This year, key composers as individual 'case studies' and drawing of themes through grounded theory.

Reporting a Case Study

Balance is needed here. A case record will contain a wealth of material of numerous types. You will want to represent the case, your analysis of it and conclusions faithfully and will have to make important choices about what to put in and what to leave out. Selection of material is crucial.

Critical incidents

My case record had:

- written accounts (my journal);
- pupil accounts (their evaluation material);
- photographic evidence;
- a video of the final performance;
- minidisc recordings of their work in progress;
- worksheets that pupils had used to help develop their compositional ideas;
- reflections by other participants (including the composer-in-residence);
- materials that had inspired their classroom work.

Given this collection of materials, there are choices that one has to make about representing the case study. Stake identifies three options:

1. A chronological or biographical development of the case
2. A researcher's view of coming to know the case
3. Description one by one of several major components of the case

The DR paper included in the exemplar reading was one example of my attempts to report on the case study. How should we measure its success or failure? To what extent:

Have you got a vision of the work done?
Do you feel in touch with the pupils mentioned?

Conclusions

Case study done well provides a 'new way of seeing'. Consider this through two metaphors:

1. René Magritte's painting

The Field Glass (1931) is a Magritte painting on cover of Stake's famous book:

A handsome window through which the voluminous sky spreads forth – but the opened window reveals the void behind the sky, beyond our ordinary vision. I interpret it as an assertion about the nature of reality. (p.98)

Stake goes on to discuss another painting, *La Condition Humaine* (1933). Magritte said of this that:

La Condition Humaine was the solution to the problem of the window. I placed in front of a window, seen from inside a room, a painting representing exactly that part of the landscape which was hidden from view by the painting. Therefore, the tree represented in the painting hid from view the real tree situated behind it, outside the room. It existed for the spectator, as it were, simultaneously in his mind, as both inside the room in the painting, and outside in the real landscape. Which is how we see the world: we see it as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of it that we experience inside ourselves. (Magritte (1938) in Stake, p.98)

In these paintings, Magritte plays with space frames and the notion of the ‘inside’ versus the ‘outside’. To use Stake’s phrase, it is ‘an assertion about the nature of reality’ (p.98).

Through case study one tries to:

- Liberate the reader from simplistic views and illusions
- Bring about new interpretation, knowledge and also new illusion
- ‘Elegant intricacy of understanding’ but the infinite void is lying just beyond (p.98)

2. Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue*

To return to where we started, within the practice of case study I believe that we hold a number of key ideas in tension:

- Spontaneity and discipline in our working methods and processes
- Fragility of our materials
- Transient and permanence nature of our thoughts, representations
- Direct and indirect communication
- Group and individual
- Simple or complex frameworks that stimulate imaginations
- Alternative ways of seeing, and perhaps an attempt at a ‘holistic’ vision?

Evans:

The resulting pictures lack the complex composition and textures of ordinary painting, but it is said that those who see well find something captured that escapes explanation.

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