Walking the Razor's Edge: Risks and Rewards for Students and Faculty adopting Case in Point Teaching and Learning Approaches

Cristina de-Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth
Assistant Professor of Education
Drake University
3206 University Avenue
Des Moines, IA 50311
cris.wildermuth@drake.edu

Elaine Smith-Bright
Assistant Professor of Education
Drake University
3206 University Avenue
Des Moines, IA 5031
elaine.smith-bright@drake.edu

Sarah Noll-Wilson
Talent and Development Consultant
ARAG
2614 Payne Rd.
Des Moines, IA 50310
Sarah@yesandconsulting.com

Alex Fink
Research Assistant
University of Minnesota
1404 Gortner Avenue
Saint Paul, MN 55108
finkx082@umn.edu

Abstract

Case in Point (CIP) is an interactive leadership development method pioneered by Ronald Heifetz. CIP instructors follow a fluid class structure, in which group dynamics and student concerns become catalysts for learning. CIP proponents defend the method's potential to help students experience real life leadership challenges. To date, however, very limited research exists on the effectiveness and risks of the CIP. This case study research explored the risks and rewards of CIP as experienced by a professor and her students in two courses. The first case was a graduate course at a liberal arts college. The second case was an undergraduate course at a large public institution. Results revealed considerable variability in student experiences. Students in the graduate course were divided. While some strongly supported the instructor and the CIP method, others felt alienated and lost. Students in the undergraduate course clearly

enjoyed the experience, dealing well with uncertainties and frustrations and forging strong bonds among each other and with the professor. CIP instructors, therefore, may need to manage an uneven environment. Risks include student frustration, increased conflict, and instructor exhaustion. Rewards include helping students experience leadership challenges and creating a *close to real life* environment. Instructors are urged to consider the ethical implications of CIP and to seek university and peer support.

Introduction

College faculty are increasingly urged to embrace active learning and learner-centered (Doyle & Zakrajsek, 2011) methodologies such as "problem-based assignments, learning contracts, case-related tasks and collaborative paper assignments" (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2010, p. 44). Passive teaching methods (such as the traditional lecture) are often criticized as not promoting significant learning (Fink, 2013; Smart, Witt, & Scott, 2012). Especially in leadership development, passive methods are deemed ineffective (Seger & Bergsten, 2013).

A particularly active and learner-centered method for teaching leadership – the Case in Point Method or CIP – has been pioneered by Ronald Heifetz and colleagues over the last three decades (Guilleux, 2010; Parks, 2005). CIP faculty seek to transform the classroom into a leadership studio (Parks, 2005) where everything that happens becomes "grist for the learning mill" (Green, 2011, p. 11). The instructor pays close attention to moments of discomfort or uncertainty, group conflict, student resistance, and even his or her own failures – and connects these moments to key concepts and objectives of the course (Parks, 2005). Thus, CIP goes beyond the traditional case method: Students learn not from the analysis of an external case but from the constant review of their own case as it unfolds in real time.

CIP is supported by recent developments in the neuroscience of learning (Zull, 2011), "sticky teaching" (Heath & Heath, 2007), and more specific work on learning leadership practice (Seger & Bergsten, 2013; Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2013). Advocates defend CIP instructors' ability to bring "reality and aliveness into the classroom" (Cox, 2011, para. 4) and to build students' resilience and awareness (Johnstone & Fern, 2010). To date, however, CIP research is limited. Currently, the main source of information for faculty is Sharon Daloz Parks' (2005) book *Leadership Can be Taught*, a report on her extended observation of Ronald Heifetz's work at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. One recent study examines student experiences (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2013), while a few others justify it as an alternative for leadership instruction (Seger & Bergsten, 2013; Bright, Turesky, Putzel, & Stang, 2012).

Additional research on CIP could be useful for at least two reasons. First, CIP is a challenging pedagogy (Parks, 2005). The classroom environment can become "different and more heated" (Green, 2011, p. 20), potentially leading to student alienation and/or faculty exhaustion. Second, the lack of evidence-based agreement on disciplinary best practices could impact the effectiveness of new CIP faculty as well as their ability to secure essential institutional support.

This article begins to address this research gap through a qualitative examination of the experiences of a professor and her students in two courses taught primarily using CIP pedagogy. One course resulted in a very divided experience with enthusiastic support ("I felt I was part of something special") on one side and considerable frustration ("I wanted to quit the program") on the other. The other course went surprisingly smoothly: Students reported feelings of excitement, fulfillment, and camaraderie, forging bonds that continued through other courses.

CIP and Adaptive Leadership

While other pedagogies (e.g., traditional case study discussions and class simulations) foreshadowed CIP, the method has been primarily connected to the teaching of adaptive leadership (S. Parks, personal communication, March 8, 2012). Hence, a key function of Heifetz's CIP is to "bring the dynamics of adaptive leadership into the learning room" (Johnstone & Fern, 2010, p. 10).

The term adaptive leadership has been defined as "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009, p. 14). At the heart of such practice is a critical differentiation between technical and adaptive challenges. The former are known problems with existing (even if difficult) solutions. The latter are problems for which solutions do not yet exist. No one knows how to solve adaptive challenges – not even the leader.

The uncertainty produced by adaptive challenges strikes traditional leadership at its core. After all, leaders are expected to *know*. Kouzes & Posner (2007) argue:

> "We expect our leaders to have a point of view about the future. We expect them to articulate exciting possibilities. We want to be confident that our leaders know where they are going." (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 37)

Further, leaders are expected to guide their followers smoothly and safely to a zero-loss world. Truly adaptive leaders, however, help followers realize that the path to sustainable solutions lies within a misty and hazardous swamp. They mobilize followers to see the swamp, accept that the swamp is there to stay, and build together a new path within the swamp. They also prepare followers to accept that change often involves frustration and losses – win-win solutions are seldom possible (Heifetz et al., 2009).

CIP classes bring to life both the adaptive leadership practice and the adaptive leadership environment that gives it birth. Thus, the CIP pedagogy rests on two interrelated assumptions. First, the myth of the *born to lead*, gifted, and heroic leader no longer serves the needs of today's swampy, adaptive, complex, and democratic world (Parks, 2005). Second, preparing leaders to operate in such a world requires more than the traditional "teaching as telling" (Parks, 2005, p. 285) model in which teachers transfer existing knowledge through a combination of lectures, presentations from experts, or class discussions. Instead, CIP practitioners believe that "leadership, although difficult to teach, can be learned in a dynamic classroom setting when participants experience in the moment some of the very conditions that make exercising leadership so challenging and dangerous" (Green, 2011, p. 8).

By definition, CIP classrooms are adaptive environments. The instructor relinquishes some of his or her formal authority and control (Johnstone & Fern, 2010).. Students, on the other hand, come to grips with a new view of the instructor – one who is not all-powerful or has all the answers (Seger & Bergsten, 2013). Instead, all class members seek answers through a recurring cycle of practice, observation, and reflection. During the process, instructor and students have the opportunity to demonstrate leadership competencies such as self-awareness; recognition and management of stress and emotions; and coping with difficult interpersonal relations (Klimosky & Amos, 2012).

A key differentiation between CIP and other experiential learning methods is its extraordinary fluidity. Other forms of experiential learning can be more controlled, as the facilitator has the option to select simulations or activities with reasonably predictable outcomes. While CIP instructors may use comparable activities as *starting points*, the end goal is to engage students in the real (and unpredictable) problems arising in the classroom. Both instructors and students are then on the hook to negotiate the dynamics of how to proceed. For example, the instructor may use his or her role as a topic of inquiry, asking students, "What would you do if you were in my position?" The instructor might then ask the group to discuss different consequences for each recommendation. For instance, "If I follow Amy's direction, I might make half the class happy. What happens with the other half?"

Two characteristics of CIP instruction can be particularly challenging: First, a CIP instructor is urged to be honest and transparent, using personal missteps as a *case* (Johnstone & Fern, 2010). Second, CIP instructors often transfer to students the bulk of problem solving responsibilities (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001), resisting the temptation to either fulfill a traditional authority role (Guilleux, 2010) or be perceived as "the only expert in the room" (Johnstone & Fern, 2010, p. 112). As a result, students may experience a sense of disorientation– and blame the instructor for the resulting confusion. As Heifetz argues in an interview with Parks (2005):

> "Students normally expect their teachers to answer questions. If I suggest that answering would alleviate their anxiety and that it may not be in the interest of their learning for me to do so (because a part of the formation of leadership is learning to take risks and to generate a stomach for disorder), I am exposing and violating an implicit part of our social contract, which understandably disturbs people." (Parks, 2005, p. 153)

This change in the established social contract could lead to a chaotic class environment. Unusual conflict may erupt as students form alliances in an effort to cope with the "seeming chaos" (Parks, 2005, p. 63). Such conflict may create the urgency the group needs to resolve an adaptive challenge (Heifetz et al., 2009). Further, some level of "confusion, frustration, disappointment, conflict, and stress" (Parks, 2005, p. 8) may help "to increase resilience and robustness of the group as a whole" (Johnstone & Fern, 2010, p. 104). Too much conflict, however, could lead to paralysis and withdrawal. The key for instructor and students, therefore, is to operate at the "productive zone of disequilibrium" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 29), a delicate edge between too much and too little heat (Parks, 2005; Cox, 2011).

Research Design and Methods

We utilized a qualitative case study method to analyze and compare two CIP courses at two separate higher education institutions, both located in the Midwest. One of the researchers taught both courses. We described each case as a "bounded unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. 193) exploring unique student and instructor experiences.

Case 1

Case 1 took place in a private liberal arts university currently serving approximately 5000 students. Participants were graduate students in a two-year, part-time master's program in adult learning.

The course selected for analysis was Organizational Development and Leading Change. This three-credit hour semester course was taught during three weekends (Friday nights and Saturdays during the day). The instructor planned for simulations and experiential exercises, the development and analysis of an adaptive case, and intense group discussions (often facilitated by the students).

We sent an email invitation, which included a link to an anonymous survey, to all 27 students enrolled in the course. The survey questions focused on students' experiences, perceptions on the instructor, and lessons learned about leadership. Twelve students agreed to participate. In addition to survey responses, we analyzed the following artifacts: (a) course materials such as the syllabus, class handouts, group activity instructions, and power point presentations; (b) student and instructor entries in the class blog; (c) the mid-term and final evaluations, including quantitative and qualitative responses; and (c) the instructor's notes and experiences, including informal notes taken during classes and regular journal entries. Finally, the data included the content of two interviews. The first interview was run with the instructor. The second interview was run with the guest facilitator who ran team building improvisation activities during the third weekend. These interviews were transcribed and entered in the dataset.

Case 2

Case 2 took place in an urban state school currently serving approximately 18,000 students. Study participants were undergraduate students majoring in Organizational Leadership, an interdisciplinary major housed in the Educational Leadership Department at the School of Education.

The course selected for study was Contemporary Issues in Leadership. This three-credit hour quarter course was taught in the second half (a shortened 5-week period) of the summer quarter. Two classes were taught each week lasting approximately three hours each. The course syllabus predicted a variety of group and individual experiences including a personal case study, a group case study, a competitive course-long simulation, a mid-term, and a final exam.

A year after the class was completed we sent all 18 students enrolled in the Contemporary Issues in Leadership class an invitation email containing a consent form and a request for an

interview. Nine students agreed to participate. The instructor was also interviewed. One of the researchers, who had not taught the course and did not know the students, conducted all interviews by telephone. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. In addition to interviews, we reviewed course materials, student artifacts such as blogs and web pages created during the class, the instructor's notes, and formative/summative evaluation results.

Class Activities and Projects

The instructor selected a variety of simulations and experiential activities for each course. Her overall purpose was to generate culture change, cooperation, and emerging leadership experiences that could be shared among all class members. She also wanted to give students the opportunity to observe instructor and student behaviors, jump starting discussions on *the class case*. Some activities were adopted for both classes – others were specific to the experiences of graduate (case 1) or undergraduate (case 2) students. Three sample activities are described below.

The Big Gong (adopted in both courses). The instructor silently handed to each student one or more cards. Each card included either a character's name and his/her role (e.g., "You are Kulk. You are a connector. You help people solve their differences") or information needed to complete a puzzle story (e.g., "The Big Gong Box brings riches and luck to the village" and "The Big Gong Box requires the opening of a special crate available only on full moon nights"). In order to solve the puzzle, students had to cooperate and make sense of the information received. One important component of *The Big Gong* was lack of instruction – the instructor simply distributed the cards and sat down. Thus, the activity illustrated two key expectations for the course: (a) do not rely on the instructor for all answers, and (b) work together, as a community of learners.

The Syllabus (adopted in both courses). First, the instructor described the course and divided students into small groups. Next, she asked the groups to thoroughly revise the syllabus and recommend any needed changes. In the graduate course (case 1) a symbolic twist was added: After asking students if they had read the syllabus, the instructor ripped it and said: "Your job now is to recreate this syllabus. You may keep the one we had before or change it entirely." The purpose of *The Syllabus* was to reinforce a key CIP point already introduced by *The Big Gong* activity: The instructor does not have all the answers, students are responsible for their own learning.

The Villagers (adopted for undergraduate students in case 2 only). The Villagers was a course-long group simulation designed to introduce key course topics. Approximately ten minutes per class were dedicated to this activity. First, each group selected a secret village *purpose* from three options: (a) empire (a village seeking strength and military power), (b) well being (happiness, safety), and (c) civilization (cultural and technological advances). Then, throughout the remainder of the course, groups collected resource cards to help fulfill their purpose (e.g., weapons and army cards for *empire* villages or arts and sciences cards for *civilization* ones). Cards were obtained through random distribution in each class, peaceful negotiation with other villages, or war (simulated through a game of dice). Multiple curve balls were thrown at the teams, including changes of rules and new challenges (each situation matched the key content of a particular class).

Data Analysis

Open coding was conducted by three of the researchers, who individually reviewed all of the data and conducted thematic analysis to identify major themes. Through joint discussion, researchers developed themes that were coherent, reconciled across raters, and appeared to have conceptual saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2014).

Establishing Trustworthiness

Data were triangulated through multiple sources: evaluation data, interviews, document review, and surveys (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In order to further seek trustworthiness, we considered two areas recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985): transferability and confirmability.

For transferability, the researcher's findings should fit into contexts outside the original study (Guba, 1981). First, we provided a baseline understanding of the CIP teaching method and environment with which future work could be compared (Merriam, 1998). Second, we strove to provide detailed and rich descriptions to guide future researchers.

Confirmability assumes that researchers bring their own preferences to the study. Actions, therefore, must be taken to ensure the findings of the study can be confirmed and the results are the actual experiences and opinions of the participants. We sought confirmability through acknowledging and controlling for instructor bias and seeking participant input (Creswell, 2014).

We acknowledged researcher bias by exploring ways in which our roles impacted our interpretations of the cases – especially Case 1, where two of the researchers still teach. Our connections with the university portrayed in Case 1 could lead us to see the case in a positive light in an unconscious effort to protect the instructor's reputation or self-esteem. Paradoxically, the same connections could activate negative bias in the instructor, as negative experiences may be more memorable than positive ones (Creswell, 2014).
We took two steps to control for the impact of both positive and negative bias. First, we sought opposing examples of our interpretations. Second, we conducted a member check by sending manuscripts to all participants in order to receive their feedback and comments (Creswell, 2014).

Results

All identified themes had seeds of risks *and* rewards. Henceforward, however, we will separate the data between *mostly risky* themes and *mostly rewarding* themes. The separation between risks and rewards has the main purpose of helping the reader better understand the data. The results section also includes leadership lessons learned by students, instructor-only themes, and commonalities between the two cases.

Case 1

Case 1 students were divided, expressing both bitter disappointment with and sincere appreciation for the instructor's efforts. Risks, however, seemed to win over rewards. The central theme was *Uneven Oven* (a wide range in student frustration and tolerance levels). Two risk themes were *Elephants in the Room* (students' conflicts and discomfort with one another) and *The Purpose of Chaos* (students' reactions to confusion and a perceived lack of direction). The main reward theme was *Real Life Learning* (connections between the class and the real world). We also uncovered two major lessons learned. First, students acknowledged that *Leadership is Hard* – challenging, dangerous, and difficult to define. Second, students learned the importance of *Leading from the Balcony*. The latter is a central adaptive leadership metaphor. Heifetz et al. (2009) recommend that leaders mentally remove themselves from a situation and watch it from the distance (as if they were at the *balcony* of a party, observing themselves and the other guests interact in real time). Table 1, below, summarizes the themes.

Table 1
Case 1 Themes

Type	Theme	Explanation
Central theme	Uneven oven	Differentiated levels of tolerance to CIP frustrations
Risk	Elephants in the room	General conflict between students in the class, separation between "supporters" and "opposers" of the class experience
Risk	The purpose of chaos	Challenges adapting to perceived lack of direction & structure
Reward	Real life learning	Connections between the course and the real world
Lesson	Leadership is hard	Realization that leadership is challenging and dangerous
Lesson	Leading from the balcony	Leaders should take a step back from a situation and take a birds' eye view.

Central theme: Uneven oven. The frustration that often characterizes Case in Point classes (Parks, 2005; Johnstone & Fern, 2010) affected students differently. For some, frustration led to detachment and disengagement. For example, one concerned student wrote: "You cannot learn in the moment when the anxiety is too high. I found myself checked out and resentful that I had to show up for another experiment weekend." For others, however, frustration was an acceptable price to be paid for learning. "I loved experiencing the 'pain' first hand," wrote another student. "I found myself in the swamp quite unexpectantly (sic) … and quite regularly."

For the instructor, the wide variation in student levels of tolerance was both disconcerting and difficult to handle. She struggled to regulate the class temperature, seeking the perfect spot between *too hot* and *too cold*. The temperature, however, felt different to each student depending

on his or her tolerance to conflict, ambiguity, and distress. This excerpt from a recorded conversation between the instructor and her guest facilitator illustrates this dichotomy well:

"Guest facilitator: It's like you have cookies on this side that burn and cookies in the middle that aren't, you know, cooking enough…
Instructor: And how the heck do you control the temperature, as you're not really controlling the temperature of the oven, you are controlling the temperature of the cookies... and there are too many darn cookies in the oven."

Risk theme # 1: Elephants in the room. Two clear student factions emerged. For some, the class was "experiential" and "challenging," for others, "exhausting" and "overwhelming." The faction supporting the CIP experience found the negative reactions of other students particularly troubling. When asked what was frustrating about the class, one student responded: "[It was frustrating to see] the actions of and listening to the comments of several of our classmates that continued to focus on themselves. They missed most of the best content of the class due to their inability to be part of a team."

The formation of factions was clear to the instructor from the very first weekend. She felt anxious as she made split second decisions on whether to intervene or let students solve their own problems. After the first night of classes, when the students had a tense discussion on the contents of the syllabus, she wrote in her journal: "It was scary to see the body languages, the anger, and the lack of support." Then, she wondered: "Do I let them keep on fighting? Do I help ease the conflict?"

Risk theme # 2: The purpose of chaos. The word "chaos" appeared frequently in the data as students faced sudden changes in direction and struggled with lengthy class discussions. Some welcomed the chaotic and free flowing nature of the course. "It was frustrating, challenging, and FUN," a student wrote. Another student acknowledged the "total chaos", but added: "I mean this in the most complimentary way because I learned an immense deal about being adaptive to change as well as working in teams." Other students, however, felt lost and unfocused. One student remarked: "It never quite felt like we knew what we were doing. I know that is part of the point because it can be chaotic and uncontrolled in an organization. However, most organizations come together for some sort of goal, or purpose."

Part of the chaos resulted from the instructor's reluctance to *take over* too quickly when student facilitators were ineffective or students could not reach a decision. As a result, one student lamented the instructor's unwillingness to "just (…) stand up and take control", and even questioned her competence. Another student observed, "She could have just not even been there. She really did nothing. (She was) unorganized and lazy." The student further wondered how the instructor kept her job if she couldn't predict the impact of her activities. The instructor, however, knew well the risks of inaction. She described the experience as "this trapeze situation in which I'm jumping in the air and passing the baton to 28 other people, some grab, some don't, and I'm falling, and somebody else had better pick the baton. But I'm not holding on to anything and I'm not holding on to the baton because the whole point is passing the baton along."

Reward theme: Real life learning. Most students were able to connect the dots between the course and *real life* experiences. Even one student who was particularly critical of the class acknowledged: "Although the class was extremely frustrating, it reflected real life in an organization. Made me very reflective about how I handle myself within an organization." A second student compared the class to "the group dynamics that occur when a team is forming, storming and norming." Finally, a student advised future peers to "be prepared to feel the same way you do in your job or your family when change seems impossible (like you're hitting a brick wall), scary (when it's moving much too fast and leaving you behind) and amazing (when you've been handed a golden opportunity - which sometimes also feels impossible and scary)."

To the instructor, the experience was "as real as teaching gets." She observed: "I'm not teaching about the real world... I'm teaching within the real world. I'm bringing conflict and fear into the open and challenging the students' paradigms of what a teacher is supposed to be."

Leadership lessons. The conflict and chaos experienced by students led them to acknowledge that *Leadership is Hard.* Students used words such as *messy*, *dangerous,* and *swampy* to refer not only to the leadership lessons contained in the class textbook (Heifetz et al., 2009) but also to the class dynamics. As testified by a student: "Putting leadership and facilitation skills into practice are (sic) much harder than learning the theory. Behavior is harder to change than thought processes, and cycles are hard to break. It takes courage!"

Interestingly, students' conclusions on the ideal leader seemed to correspond to their perceptions of the class. Class supporters wondered whether images of a *hero leader* were unrealistic. For example, one student wrote in the summative class evaluation: "(I learned) how important it is to recognize that no one necessarily "knows" the answers, not even the leaders. We're all winging it, just a bit, with the information we have." On the other hand, the students who were most critical of the class methods seemed to hold on to the image of a decisive leader, someone who could clearly lead the group towards success. "You need to have a strong leader," one student argued, "Someone that can take control and make decisions."

Students were considerably intrigued by Heifetz et al.'s (2009) *Go to the Balcony* metaphor. Several students reported following the *Balcony* advice during some of the more heated class discussions, as exemplified by this student's comment: "I (…) learned how critical it is to take a seat at the balcony and watch the dance floor. There have been many times where I just keep dancing instead of watching what's going on around me. Very powerful lesson!"

Case 2

In Case 2 rewards seemed to trump risks. A central theme was *Enjoying the Ride.* Students expressed considerable joy, excitement, and energy. A related reward theme – *Building a Community* - described student's connections with the instructor and with one another. Two risk themes were *Elephants in the Other Room*, which had to do with students' intergroup conflicts, and *Adaptive Learning,* describing students' surprise with the instructor's laissez faire style and their efforts to adapt to a new class environment. The main lessons learned included *Lead with the Team* (the critical role of teamwork and cooperation in leadership efforts), *Diversity Matters* (the importance of individual team and leadership style differences) and

(similarly to Case 1 students) *Lead from the Balcony*. Table 2, below, summarizes the case 2 themes.

Table 2
Case 2 themes

Type	Theme	Explanation
Central theme	Enjoying the ride	References to fun, enjoyment, and interaction
Risk	Elephants in other room	Conflicts among *groups* of students pertaining to competitive class activities rather than to the class itself
Risk	Adaptive learning	Students' surprise with the instructor's laissez faire style and with the different class methods
Reward	Building a community	Students' connections with the instructor and with one another
Lesson	Leading with the team	Critical role of teamwork and cooperation
Lesson	Diversity matters	The importance of individual differences and their relationship to leadership styles and group dynamics
Lesson	Leading from the balcony	Leaders should take a step back from a situation and see it from a birds' eye view.

Central theme: Enjoying the ride. A year later, students recalled the class fondly, comparing it favorably to more traditional college experiences. They referred to the class as a "great experience," and enjoyed "the freedom of learning," the "multiple perspectives," and the high levels of interactivity and experimentation. As reported by a student: "Nobody will forget the fun times that we had and how much we actually learned from (the course) even though it was fun. Like you can actually have fun in class and learn more than you've ever thought about learning." Even "Maria," (all names were changed to protect confidentiality), a student who struggled with some of the more course's more chaotic moments, evaluated the class as "the best class I ever took at (University x); graduating this year and looking back at everything I've ever done, I couldn't say that I learned more in any other class."

The instructor's journals and interviews matched the general positive feelings expressed by students, as she described the course as "the most rewarding experience I have ever had as a professor." She reminisced about the last class, when the students surprised her with a pizza party, balloons, a certificate, and a hand-made t-shirt with the words "Heifetz invites you to go to the balcony." Recognizing that the class could still be improved, she offered: "there is so much that went right. There was some energy going on around them, it was a community of learners."

Reward theme: Building a community. The unique class structure – or lack thereof – seemed to strengthen student relationships. Students reported bonds that went beyond the classroom, describing impromptu meetings in corridors and lunch outings after the course was over. They recalled moments in which they stopped to chat with colleagues outside of class or

relied on them for program advice. As expressed by "Jane," a non-traditional student: "Unlike other classes where after ten weeks you still don't know other classmates, this class was like meeting your family at the dinner table every week!"

Intragroup relationships appeared to be particularly healthy. Student data involved testimonies of respect, camaraderie, and effective group work. The following was a representative comment: "I had a really good group. We were very much involved, always trying to help one another."

In part, students' motivation to *win* some of the more competitive activities (especially the course-long simulation) seemed to strengthen intragroup bonds. As a student recalled: "we worked together to try to be the first one to win." The strangeness of the experiences, however, also seemed to influence group dynamics. A student explained: "She always had us doing crazy fun stuff so no matter what the battle was or what we were trying to accomplish that day we all had that openness towards one another where we could talk to each other in order to win whatever we needed to do or learn the process that she was trying to teach us."

The instructor also bonded with students over the challenges they overcame together. She later explained: "I had lived with them such a weird experience that they became part of that experience. I don't think I'll ever forget those students. I was so proud of them."

Risk theme # 1: Elephants in the other room. Not surprisingly, a byproduct of the intragroup strength was – at least in the beginning – the rejection of out-group members. Two students from different teams used the word "backstabbing" to refer to another team's efforts to "win." A student wrote in her blog: "There were gestures and comments made throughout the evening that indicated 'I will take you down if I have to'." Maria was particularly frustrated with the competitive nature of the course-long simulation *The Villagers*, referring to it as "a nightmare," and feeling that students were taking it "too far." "There was a point," she recalled, "where I disengaged myself from that simulation because I got so frustrated with it." She acknowledged, however, "I think the point was for us to get frustrated," and added: "(This simulation is) supposed to teach us something (on) what it means to be a leader and how each individual leads differently."

The instructor noticed the undercurrents of conflict and worried about keeping it all reasonably safe. Thus, she carefully selected the group dynamics or problems to bring out into the open while weighing the risks and benefits of each discussion. She explained, "It's not a blind application of whatever happens here we're going to discuss," and she added: "I didn't want anybody to feel embarrassed. There is only so far that I was willing to take a group of undergraduate students who were under my care."

Risk theme # 2: Adaptive learning. Students quickly realized that the course was different from the norm. The first shock came during *The Syllabus* exercise. After class, Jane wrote on her blog: "To me it was amazing how the syllabus became like a Holy Bible to us. It was gospel and we believed in it. These were not just [the instructor's] ideas of what she felt we needed out of the class but what did I expect to get out of it and how would I make that happen." She later explained: "I think the class should be re-named "Adaptive Learning" because I have

had to adapt my way of learning things from the way most instructors teach to [the instructor's] way of teaching."

A few of the students contrasted the unstructured nature of the course with their own personal styles. As explained by Lucille, a student taking her first course in the Organizational Leadership program: "I'm a type-A, anal, detail person and [the instructor] is not. She's a fly by the seat of your pants type person. So it took me a while to get used to her teaching style." Maria agreed: "The most frustrating thing was that there were no rules. Sometimes I got to the point where (…) I can't really, I don't think I can do this anymore; like I need direction, I need to know, if where I'm going is in the right direction. Because sometimes I felt so lost."

The instructor recognized the problems and worried about taking the fluidity of the CIP method too far. I wanted to be the "antithesis of the autocratic leader," she explained, "and sometimes it felt like I had gone overboard." She worried that students would find the lack of structure particularly frustrating and acknowledged: "Perhaps my fear would be that they would perceive me negatively. That they would see me as a wishy-washy person, disorganized; not able to make decisions on my own."

Leadership lessons. Data from student blogs, evaluations, and interviews revealed three leadership lessons. First, students learned the importance of *Leading with the Team* - the value of teamwork and the inability of any leader to work on his/her own. Representative comments included: "You're not as smart as you think you are and you always need the help of others around you" and "In order to be a productive leader, you don't have to have all the answers."

Second, students learned that *Diversity Matters*. They acknowledged differences in their own leadership styles and in the ways class members reacted to common experiences. One student wrote in her blog, "I frequently find myself sitting back in class and thinking 'why does this person think this way, and what has made them form this opinion'." Another acknowledged that one leader cannot possibly meet the expectations of all his or her followers and recommended: "In the end you just have to judge for yourself…you can't fit 'em all. Pick the one that's best for you or best for the situation at the time."

A third lesson learned – *Leading from the Balcony* – was similar to one identified in Case 1. The data contained multiple references to the *Balcony* metaphor. One student reported using the model to help her own mother overcome a crisis: "I had a conversation with my mother about a mishap with her friends. I was able to explain in some detail the culture of their friendship, their rituals, and their loyalties. I was already on the balcony but I invited her to join me in this "breathtaking" view so that she may gain a better understanding of her friends and how to deal with minor disputes."

Instructor Themes

Four themes identified in the data were only germane to the instructor's experiences. These themes appeared in both cases 1 and 2 and are summarized in Table 3, below.

Table 3
Instructor themes

Type	Theme	Explanation
Risk	Lonely goose	Experiences of isolation, self doubt, or worry
Risk	Open book	The impact of excessive honesty and transparency
Risk	Planned improvisation	Difficulties preparing a constantly changing class
Reward	Becoming irrelevant	Sharing the leadership duties with students, watching leadership emerge within the class

Risk theme # 1: Lonely goose. The data from both cases 1 and 2 included concerns with lack of support and isolation. The instructor felt that she could not rely on the students, as that might place an unfair "burden" on those who were closer to her. She could not count on other faculty members either as CIP had not previously been attempted at either university. The instructor knew, therefore, that she was taking a risk. She explained: "I was the trapeze artist who had some onlookers behind me saying "Really cool that [you] are doing that! And potentially those could be the same people who would point the finger at me and say oh, look at that, didn't work, did it?" She added: "If I'm thinking of myself as a tenure track professor who needs to publish, who needs to get good evaluations, if I look at what I stand to lose, it's very easy for me to say I'm not doing this anymore. [If] we're going to be doing this I need support. It takes a village to do Case-in-Point teaching."

Not surprisingly, data from case 1 included the most examples of worry, self-doubt and even physical and emotional exhaustion. At the end of the first weekend in case 1 the instructor wrote: "After class I just sat there, I didn't have the energy to drive home. I just sat there emotionally drained." In another journal entry she added: "I'm pretty exhausted. There are a few things more draining than this amount of risk." Even the far more benign case 2, however, was recalled as "the scariest experience ever" as the instructor tried new dynamics or activities and wondered; "oh my God, is this thing going to work?"

During the third weekend of classes in case 1, a guest speaker (who is also one of the researchers) came to facilitate a series of team building activities. At that point, the instructor reported feeling a wave of relief: "Do you know the story of the geese, where the leadership switches?" she asked. She was referring to the way a flock of geese alternate leadership, allowing a tired head goose to rest as another one takes over. "At that point," she continued, "I desperately needed to have another head goose. So when you came in, for my own emotional exhaustion standpoint it was vital. So that I could take over again."

Risk theme # 2: Open book. The CIP requirement that anything happening in the class - including perceptions of the instructor - be used as *grist for the mill* was particularly difficult for the instructor. She wrote in her journal: "If I was scared, or if I felt that I had messed up, I would bring it up. And that made it very vulnerable. And very scary." She added: "I'm not an open book. I don't share with people all my frailties or all the moments in which something

didn't work. The self-examination and the self-exposure … it's humiliating."

Risk theme # 3: Planned improvisation. The instructor's notes illustrated a paradox: She planned each course meticulously, and yet needed to be ready to abandon those plans at a moment's notice. She explained: "The class is so darn unpredictable. It doesn't matter how much I prepare, how many handouts I copy, whether I use power points or not. It doesn't matter how many books and articles I read and dump on Blackboard. Regardless of the level of preparation, I still feel unprepared for whatever comes my way."

A critical challenge for the instructor was choosing when to follow and when to abandon her plans in order to *grab* a CIP moment (i.e., pause to connect a particular class event to key adaptive leadership concepts). Decisions were made on the fly, without the benefit of time, reflection, or conversations with a co-instructor. "The tough part," she explained "is the selection. There are enough rich CIP moments all the time to fill a thousand discussions." Likewise, it was difficult to determine when to *stop* a discussion or intervene to cool the room temperature. "There isn't a magic button, there isn't a light in your head that says – now! – go! – stop! – move!" she explained. "We don't have a CIP computer in our minds – we have to make instant decisions and some, in hindsight, may not have been the best ones."

Interestingly, the instructor felt that that the CIP method required a stronger knowledge of the course material. She contrasted a CIP course with a more traditional ethics course she taught. "If I'm giving a lecture on John Rawls," she explained, "I don't have to have John Rawls so embedded in my head that whatever happens in that class, I can use it to bring John Rawls back."

Reward theme: Becoming irrelevant. One of the instructor's expressed intentions was to "become irrelevant." 'She wanted students to take over and own their learning. She also wanted students to take charge of facilitating sessions, lead exercises, and organize decision-making processes. This created the foundation for many leadership lessons.

The data suggest that students became more independent as the course progressed. At the end of weekend 1 in case 1, when asked how she felt when students took over the facilitation of some discussions, the instructor reported being "ready to pounce and take over." By weekend 3, however, she recalled, "I finally saw those groups taking leadership. And that weekend was when I became irrelevant. That was the first weekend that I did not become exhausted." Students on case 2 also recalled leading discussions and solving problems. One student summarized the experience: "She was not leading the class; we were leading our own class. She gave instructions and we led ourselves."

Commonality: Changing the Class DNA
The two courses were significantly different. Case 1 students experienced more conflict and frustration; students in case 2 built a stronger community and seemed to *enjoy the ride* more. However, a closer inspection of the data from cases 1 and 2 allowed us to see at least one overarching commonality. Students from both courses experienced significant *Changes in the Class DNA*, including changes in student and instructor roles. As the instructor explained on her journal, "It's ironic, that I wouldn't notice how much I was asking people to change. Perhaps I wasn't [noticing] because I already teach in a non-traditional way. But there's a big difference

between teaching in non-traditional ways while still holding on to my authority and the amount of change that I expected of people this time."

First, students did not expect to be asked to *do* so much in the class – or to make so many decisions. One example was *The Syllabus* exercise, which struck a nerve in both cases. An undergraduate (case 2) student explained, "The most frustrating part was that we'd never had this type of class before so we didn't really know what we were doing." Overall, however, case 2 undergraduate students seemed to enjoy the experience. A satisfied student wrote on her blog: "It appeared to me that the entire mood of the class changed. We were suddenly empowered to make decisions about our own well-being. What? Someone actually cares what we think?" Graduate (case 1) students, on the other hand, expressed considerable distress. As one student explained: "Many of us really like a syllabus like the one you spent hours on, and tore up in front of us, and that we all cobbled back together to look an awful lot like it looked at the beginning. It makes things easy, expected, known."

Students from both courses were surprised at the instructor's "hands off" style. An undergraduate student shared her first impressions: "She walked in the first day, I'm like this lady is crazy, she's out of her mind…like this is never going to work." Supporters and opposers, however, evaluated the instructor's non-traditional role differently. Supporters were surprised but ultimately appreciative of the instructor's style, including her "willingness to experiment" and her "honesty." Opposers resented what they perceived as "lack of leadership" and criticized the instructor for not stepping in sooner to reduce conflict or frustration.

Discussion

Hofstede and Hofstede (2010) defined culture as the "collective programming of the mind" (p. 5). By the time students arrive at university, they will have had 12 or more years to solidify such programming. They can recognize politeness and rudeness. They know how to handle conflict between each other (normally in private) and with the instructor (often only during anonymous evaluations). They also share certain expectations for the instructor – what decisions he or she should make, how the class time should be handled, etc.

Cultural rules have a purpose – they bring predictability and safety to group interactions. A central risk facing CIP instructors and students, therefore, is the disorientation and conflict resulting from a significant change in the classroom culture.

Both disorientation and conflict were observed in the data. First, the class environment became confusing as students lost the clear direction normally established by the instructor. Bewildered, students struggled to establish new cultural norms. Who speaks when? What does appropriate behavior look like *now*? Is it *really* all right to question the instructor's authority and decisions? Do we need to choose a new leader? If so, whom should we choose? Then, conflict emerged as a natural byproduct of unclear norms and a vacuum in authority. Indeed, students participating in case 1 recalled extreme examples of *viciousness* or *catty* behaviors as supporters and opposers of the method struggled to make sense of the new cultural rules. Even the more benign case 2 included examples of *backstabbing* and *in-group/out-group* attitudes.

As students and instructor handled disorientation and conflict, they may have experienced a form of culture shock, a psychological state "where the individuals are not certain what is expected of them or of what they can expect from the persons around them (Pedersen, 1995, p. 1)." Culture shock can also be experienced by anyone "forced to adjust to an unfamiliar social system where previous learning no longer applies" (Pedersen, 1995, p. 1). In particular, the instructor faced a dual challenge. First, she coped with her own feelings of disorientation, tiredness, and inefficacy. Such feelings were easily perceived in her journals and interviews. Second, she received the brunt of the blame for changing the cultural rules and causing discomfort.

Arguably, completely avoiding the effects of culture shock is neither possible nor desirable. After all, culture shock can be seen as a learning process – "a state of growth and development which – however painful it might be – may result in positive and even essential insights" (Pedersen, 1995, p. 2). Thus, the very disorientation and frustration generated by change could lead to powerful leadership lessons. Leadership, after all, is dangerous by definition (Heifetz et al., 2009).

The key for the instructor, therefore, may lie in finding the perfect spot between too much and too little discomfort (Parks, 2005; Cox, 2011). The data, however, showed wide variation in student levels of tolerance. An overarching risk for the instructor, therefore, may stem from the management of an uneven environment. This raises two topics of discussion: (a) what ethical issues emerge from the CIP method? and (b) what types of support might the instructor need?

Ethical considerations. CIP instructors may need to accept the possibility that some students will *not* succeed. As Linsky (interviewed by Parks, 2005) argues, "This is a vulnerability of this teaching method. There are always going to be people who will be left behind" (p. 253). Accepting such losses in advance, however, may pose instructors with a moral dilemma. Arguably, after all, instructors are responsible for providing *all* students with the best possible learning conditions.

Kjellström (2009) offered an interesting discussion on the ethics of non-traditional experiential teaching methods in university settings. First, she wondered if it was ethically acceptable for instructors to generate conflict. Second, she questioned instructors' "psychological training to support the students adequately" (p. 123). Finally, she asked: "The ethical question is whether it is right to assign tasks that people might have refused to perform had they been adequately informed in the beginning" (p. 124).

Heeding the above admonition, instructors might provide students with advance warning of the benefits and risks of the CIP method before the course starts. Ideally, reasonable alternatives should be provided to students who choose not to participate in the experience. Further, instructors may need to plan time to meet one-on-one with students, checking individual temperatures and providing additional support to those experiencing severe frustration.

Instructor support. The absence of university level and peer support may lead CIP instructors to face an unreasonable amount of risk. That risk may be particularly prevalent when (a) the instructor is relatively new and untenured, and (b) the method is not commonly applied at

the institution. Department and unit leadership must be ready and willing to share the risks of CIP applications. Instructors may also benefit from a co-facilitator – a teaching assistant, alum or peer who may watch the class interactions *from the Balcony,* helping to gauge the class temperature and support struggling students.

Limitations and Topics for Future Research

Several important limitations need to be considered. These impact the transferability of the results to other CIP cases.

First, the dynamics and characteristics of a particular group (including the instructor's and the students' personality traits and experiences) have a bearing on a CIP course. The results of this study, therefore, could derive from combinations of individual characteristics rather than the pedagogy itself. Program-specific characteristics such as periodicity of classes, class length, and number of students per class may also impact student experiences and course results.

Second, specific experiential activities such as the course-long simulation adopted in case 2 were authored by the instructor and are not a necessary component of CIP. The exercises and simulations implemented in the analyzed courses, however, affected student experiences. We cannot differentiate between the impact of the CIP method and the impact of instructor-specific pedagogical choices.

Third, the data collection occurred in different timelines (only a few months after the class was over for case 1, a year later for case 2) and included different methods (anonymous surveys for case 1, interviews for case 2). These were two separate case studies, combined for the purposes of this research report. In particular, the differentiated timelines may have impacted students' and instructor's recollections.

Further research on the CIP method may minimize the limitations previously mentioned by (a) exploring the impact of the instructor's and the students' personalities on CIP experiences, (b) comparing and contrasting CIP courses involving the same experiential activities, (c) comparing and contrasting CIP courses taught by different instructors, and (d) following the same data collection methods for all included cases.

Final Reflections

In *Leadership can be Taught* Sharon Parks (2005) urges leaders to "work on an edge" (p. 210). This edge represents the perfect spot before the abyss where the view is breathtaking but one is still on solid ground. The key, she argues, is to "walk the razor's edge without getting your feet too cut up" (p. 210).

The data from this study revealed both the risks and the rewards of the razor's edge. Risks included student frustration and disorientation, increased levels of conflict, and instructor exhaustion. Rewards included clear connections between the method and *real life* adaptive challenges.

Perhaps Parks was overly optimistic. It may be impossible to walk the edge without getting cut up. The key may be not to avoid hurt altogether but to ensure just-in-time healing and a built-in *Balcony view* (i.e., someone who can watch from the distance and provide insight) for both faculty and students. As suggested by the instructor: It may "take a village" to safely, ethically, and successfully apply CIP.

References

Bright, D. S., Turesky, E. F., Putzel, R., & Stang, T. (2012). Professor as facilitator: Shaping an emerging, living system of shared leadership in the classroom. *Journal of Leadership Education,* 11(1), 157-176.

Cox, D. (2011) Leadership education using case-in-point teaching. Retrieved 9/8/11 from http://www.cit.astate.edu/dwcox/case in point

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Doyle, T., & Zakrajsek, T. (2011). *Learner centered teaching: Putting the research on learning into practice.* Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Fink, L. D. (2013). *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Green, C. (2011). Case in point: A taxing and transforming leadership education art form. Retrieved 2/22/12 from http://kansasleadershipcenter.org/files/CIP_Final_SglPage.pdf

Guba, E. G. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic enquiries. *Educational Resources Information Centre Annual Review. 29*(2), 75-91.

Guilleux, F. (2010). A developmental perspective on leadership education of aspiring principals. Retrieved from Udini by Proquest at http://udini.proquest.com/view/a-developmental-perspective-on-pqid:2447156011/

Haber-Curran, P., & Tillapaugh, D. (2013). Learning leadership through student-centered and inquiry-focused approaches to teaching adaptive leadership. *Journal of Leadership Education,* 12(1), 92-116.

Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2007). *Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die.* New York, NY: Random House.

Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Hofstede, G., & Hofstede, G. J. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software for the mind* (3rd Ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Johnstone, M., & Fern, M. (2010). Case in point: An experiential methodology for leadership education. *Journal of the Kansas Leadership Centre, 2*(2), 98-116.

Klimosky, R., & Amos, B. (2012). Practicing evidence-based education in leadership development. *Academy Of Management Learning & Education*, *11*(4), 685-702. doi:10.5465/amle.2012.0018

Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (2007). *The Leadership Challenge* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.

Merriam, S.B. (1998) *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Parks, S. (2005). *Leadership can be taught.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Pedersen, P. (1995). *The five stages of culture shock.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Seger, J., & Bergsten, U. (2013). Teaching about leadership or teaching through leadership? *Journal of Leadership Education,* 12(1), 252-261.

Smart, K. L., Witt, C., & Scott, J. P. (2012). Toward learner-centered teaching: An inductive approach. *Business Communication Quarterly*, *75*(4), 392-403. doi:10.1177/1080569912459752.

Struyven, K., Dochy, F., & Janssens, S. (2010). 'Teach as you preach': The effects of student-centred versus lecture-based teaching on student teachers' approaches to teaching. *European Journal Of Teacher Education*, *33*(1), 43-64. doi:10.1080/02619760903457818

Zull, J. (2011). *From brain to mind: Using neuroscience to guide change in education.* Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Author Biographies

Cristina de Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth is an Assistant Professor at Drake University's Master of Science in Leadership Development. Dr. Wildermuth received her doctorate in Leadership Studies from Bowling Green State University. Her key research interests include the Case in Point Method, Employee Engagement, and Personality at Work.

Elaine Smith-Bright is an Assistant Professor at Drake University's Master and Specialist of Science in Educational Leadership. Dr. Smith-Bright received her doctorate in Educational Leadership from Drake University. She is a former school principal and assistant superintendent, with a research interest in effective leadership development.

Sarah Noll Wilson is a Talent Development Business Partner at ARAG, a legal benefits solutions provider. Sarah received her Masters of Science in Adult Learning and Organizational Performance from Drake University. Additionally, she founded Yes And Consulting, a firm specializing in team and leadership development.

Alexander Fink is a Ph.D. student in Youth Studies and Social Work at the University of Minnesota. He studies methods of making research to document injustice and resistance available to young people to create social change. His research, teaching, and engagement occur at the intersections of participatory research methods, youth leadership development, the history of social movements, and technology.