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Training for Urban Management: The Case Study Dynamic

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Introduction

This article describes a case study research and training method currently being developed with the co-operation of OECD in Great Britain and overseas. It is intended ideally for “in-house” use in local authorities, above all with personnel actively involved in the urban planning and development processes. It can, however, be adapted for use in a variety of planning and management environments and contexts. We are essentially concerned, then, with providing the educational technology for helping local authority personnel to achieve a deeper understanding of their developmental role, and so contribute to an improvement in their urban management ability.

The basis of the case study training method described here is the documentation and analysis of a local level planning project (or projects) by a small outside research team, and the exploitation of this material in experientially-based learning exercises undertaken with members of the authority who actually undertook that scheme. These exercises can involve not only those individuals who played leading roles in the case study, but also those more peripherally involved, as well as appropriate representatives of such outside concerns as residents’ associations and developers. In Britain, this may be increasingly welcomed given the current concern with “public accountability” and “public involvement”.

Action Research and the Case Method

The case study method, of course, is well established as an educational technique in management training [1]. It is of interest to note, however, that Margerison has recently pointed out that “cases are always of someone else’s organization and the learner is expected to transfer any learning he gains to his own organization”. He goes on to suggest that “we must move towards an action research and action learning frame of reference, where we gather data on the clients and work with these data to try to help the educational process” [2].

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Here then we are putting forward a relatively simple case study technique that can be used to aid practitioners in learning about their part in recently undertaken or on-going planning projects. As Eddison has suggested, what people need is “a capacity to grasp what’s going on around them” [3]. But in trying to provide this, we suggest that the immediacy and relevance of the case material is of utmost importance. Without this focus management training courses often have to start from scratch in establishing case material, identifying roles and setting new contexts for participants. It is a contrived “experience” that provides the basis for experiential learning. On the other hand with a “live” detailed real world case study, participants have a head start, having already “lived” the case study. Exercises drawn from the case material can then lead to a fuller appreciation of the context, meaning and reasoning behind their own and other people’s actions in the case study, from which, in turn, more general insights about the functioning of the authority may be gained.

Case Study Documentation

An essential prerequisite to the case study project is that both the research team and the local authority personnel are clear about the general programme. The data compilation and analysis, carried out by the research team in conjunction with local authority personnel, can take a considerable time in locating and collecting from in-house, field and secondary sources. Then, follow-up structuring seminars and draft cases may take an equal amount of time to set up and refine. The essential point here is that the case study building exercise is often a complex learning process which is in few ways simple or clear cut.

In this context the case study is seen at its best when it covers a local level project-housing improvement or renewal scheme, for example, from which it is felt “lessons can be learnt”. Clearly there are a variety of factors to be considered here, but the general “manageability” of the project must be kept in mind with definable space and time limits being advantages and with clearly defined operational roles. Access to the “on file” documents of the procedural course of the project is essential, as this is the starting point for the compilation of the case study data-base.

The data-base is compiled by the research team (this may involve only one person actually working in the authority) working in conjunction with authority employees. Background information, establishing the legislative, administrative, spatial etc contexts, is put together by way of introduction to the authentic documentation of the decision-making processes in the case study, drawn from the local authority files and elsewhere as necessary. This documentation is

then structured and coded to form a loose framework for subsequent analysis and discussion. One way of doing this is to identify a series of decision-making stages within the administrative process and group documents around these stages, with commentary pages providing a summary narrative of the content and significance of each of the documents. From here, and incorporating interview and other material as necessary, the research team assemble a package that will provide the basis for subsequent development in the training sessions. This package may include the following:

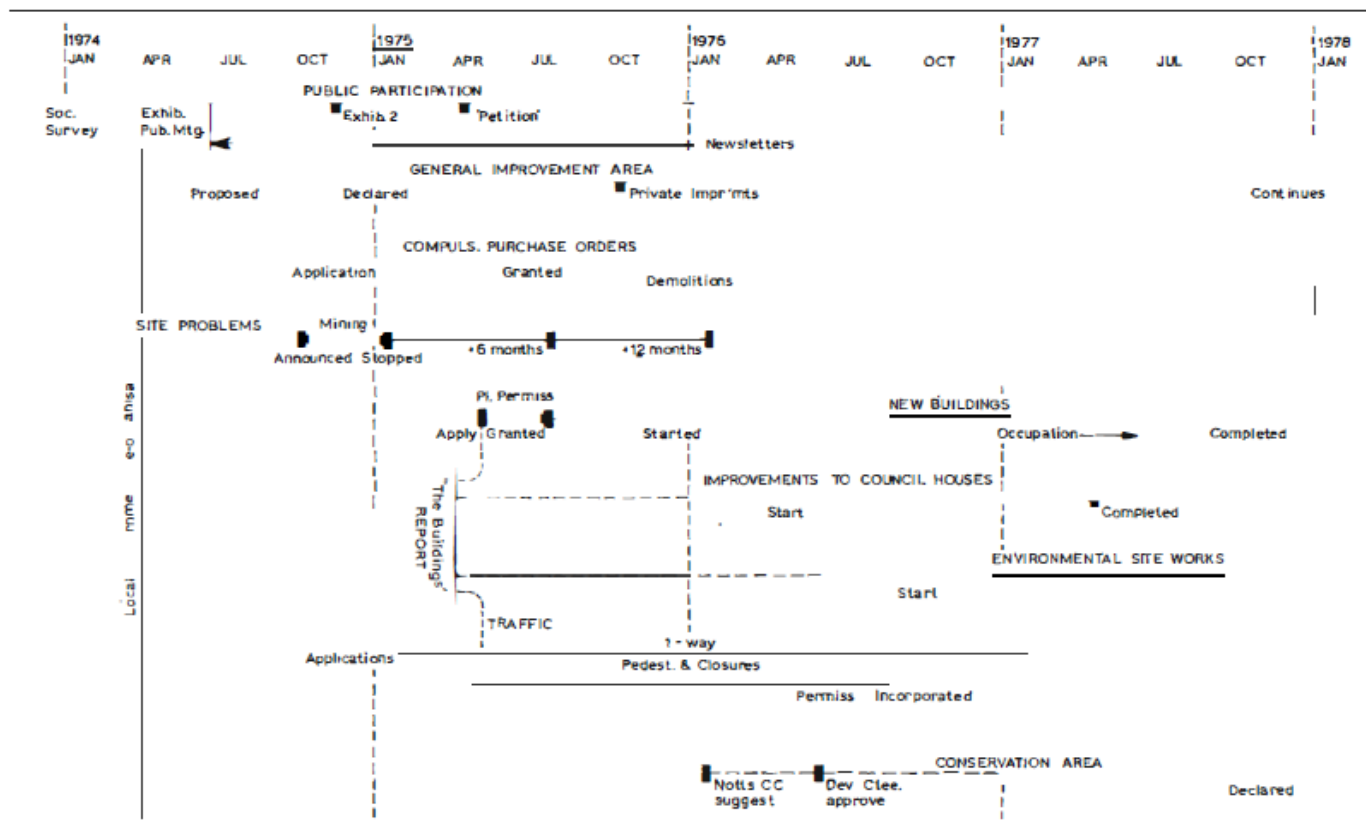


Figure 1. The process-flow chart for the Buildings Case Study, a mixed house improvement and renewal scheme recently undertaken by Broxtowe Borough Council, Nottinghamshire

The structured and coded data base;

A brief written summary of the case study, identifying aspects for debate and questioning;

A process flow chart, in which the separate but often overlapping processes involved in the project are identified (Figure 1);

A decision stage chart, closely reflecting the structuring of the data base, in which the different entities involved in each decision-making stage are identified (Figure 2).

Feedback and Exploitation for Training

Once the research team have completed the data collection and analyses stages, arrangements for the feedback and learning exercises have to be developed. It is important, as already noted, that the authority commits itself to participating in these exercises beforehand. A start can be made through circulating material by post, but eventually in-house seminars will be needed to make full use of the material. Whilst the exact design and execution of these seminars remains, of necessity, flexible, the following issues are likely to be central components of the learning experience:

- General discussion of the summary report and, for those who have found time to go through it in detail, the data base itself (several copies will be on hand for general reference). Questionnaires will be used to promote relevant questioning and discussion of points raised in the summary report.
- Group feedback on the process flow chart, to consider: where, in this scheme, did each individual play a part? Were they aware of other simultaneous/overlapping on-going processes? Can “bottlenecks” be identified where the complexity of the process hampered the implementation of the project?
- Analysis of the decision stage chart. Individuals are asked to identify the stages where they were involved; to pinpoint the key decision stages in the success or failure of the project; and to justify their opinions (and their decisions) in the light of ensuing debate and questioning.

- Participation in a partial or full-blown simulation of the case study. This simulation will be designed by the research team and will probably include a somewhat simplified re-enactment of part, or all, of the case study, depending on time limitations and the complexity of the case study itself. All the gaming tool kit may be used—game board, representative pieces, role play descriptions, and game rounds (taken from the “decision-making stages” of the data bases). Some participants may be playing their own real life role in the simulation, although there is much to be said for playing other people’s roles and several runs may be attempted. De-briefing sessions can include debate on the game model (was it as it happened in real life?) and on insights gained, by various participants, into the decision-making process in general. This can also be tied up with previous sessions on the process flow chart and decision-stage chart. Further discussion can attempt to link sessions learnt in this case study with the more general functioning of the authority and individual personnel.

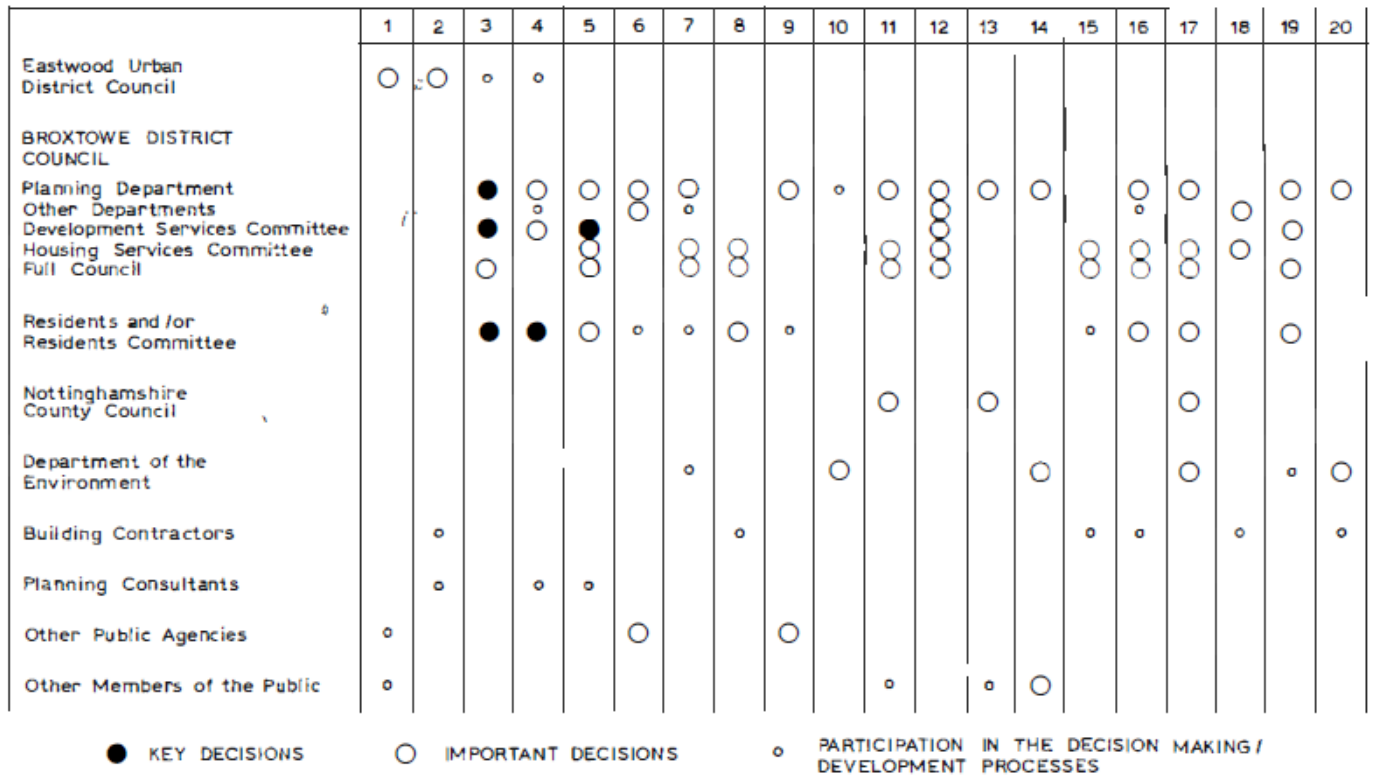


Figure 2. The decision-making chart for the Buildings Case Study

Summary

Several points emerge from this experience and the brief foregoing discussion is but an outline of aspects of urban case work. Given our limited urban management expertise, such efforts to improve our performance in this realm have to demonstrate more immediate relevance. The great advantage of the case study approach is that it is anchored to real life material which has an immediacy that can be readily appreciated. We have argued that the methodology can be exploited much more fully in relation to urban management issues.

For example, cases can do much to focus on critical gates and levers essential to the achievement of a better quality environment. The role of individuals, agencies and decision chains can be dynamically exposed in a way that speeds learning through exploitation of the synoptic view. A great many people can be actively involved in case study activity which can accommodate a variety of levels and types of learning at one and the same time.

Of prime importance in this context is the ability of case studies to generate a continuing interest in self-learning. Once an approach and a related methodological framework is made explicit then there is little to inhibit the individual, group or agency from holding up the mirror to themselves. In other words the operationalising of case study material is in the main stream of action orientated learning and research. It can be seen that the same level of scrutiny and involvement can be applied beneficially to local situations and individual tasks. The case study can provide a focus for interdisciplinary involvement be it in simple terms of identifying information sources or in analysing complex decision making situations.

Our experience in developing mechanisms of this kind in relation to contemporary urban management challenges is limited. However, we do need to be reminded that case studies are *not* a new way of studying the world and much can be gained from the experience of others. The exploratory work discussed above does break some new ground and if this

momentum is maintained in building on the experience of others, it is clear that we have every chance of improving and speeding the learning process which will give better shape to the world about us.

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4. Port Service Area Project, Santander, Spain, Planning and Development of a Port Side Industrial Zone. (M. Wynn, P. Portilla, J. Urena).

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