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Beyond a Common Approach: Teaching Students the Ethical Practice of Reference

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This article describes the creation and use of case studies to help teach the ethical practice of reference. There are considerations for applying the case study method in reference which require cumulative preparation through the study and reinforcement of reference values, functions, behaviors, and ethical codes. The strategies for writing ethical case studies in reference are detailed. Overall, case studies on the ethical practice of reference are valued for promoting reflection and active learning in library science students through analysis and discussion.

KEYWORDS Ethics, Reference, Library science students, Instruction, Professional Codes of Ethics, Case Study Method

Introduction

In 2009, I was invited to teach the introduction to reference course known formally as *Information Services and Sources* at Pratt Institute. This opportunity was extended with the understanding I would share my knowledge and experiences from the field as an academic librarian specializing in reference (especially, digital) and instruction. As a

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practitioner keen on applying theory with practice, I taught first-year library science students about the fundamentals of reference and information services (defined hereinafter as “reference”).

Of the myriad topics covered, I initially struggled to teach the ethical practice of reference beyond simply reviewing various professional codes of ethics. In fact, reflecting back to the reference course I took in library school a decade ago, I had a hard time recalling what, if anything at all, was presented on the topic. I had a vague recollection of reviewing the American Library Association (ALA) *Code of Ethics* (last amended January 22, 2008) and covering some of the key principles such as intellectual freedom and privacy.

After my first semester teaching the course, I met with colleagues who taught other sections of the same course. They seemed equally confounded in teaching ethics. A senior member in our group generously shared his use of case studies from Hebert White’s *Ethical Dilemmas in Libraries* (1992) as well as Fay Zipkowitz’s *Professional Ethics in Librarianship* (1996), both which his students enjoyed reading and discussing as a class. Following suit, I assigned a few of these case studies for class discussion. Although having students use dated case studies based on traditional reference interactions (i.e. face-to-face) can be instructive, this approach was limited, considering new and evolving ethical dilemmas arising from new technologies, reference initiatives, and tools. Reaching a similar conclusion about using dated case studies, Buchanan stated, “Many of the core principles of intellectual freedom, privacy, rights, and professional responsibilities presented in the cases remain intact and continue to be relevant, but many additional changes - - legal, technological, social, political, and cultural - - face the field in significant flux” (2009).

Intent on creating ethical case studies drawn from current personal experiences and observations, I set out to learn how to write case studies. This article advocates for writing case studies not only to enhance teaching the ethical practice of reference, but also to promote active learning in library science students.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Case Study Methods in Teaching Professional Disciplines

There is a longstanding practice of employing the case study method in the curricula of many professional fields, such as law, medicine, and business. The literature in many of these disciplines is rich with accounts on the advantages and disadvantages of the case study method as a pedagogical tool (Kirby, Ross, Middlebrook & Keeffe, 2010; McKeachie, 1994). In general, case studies offer the opportunity for identifying, analyzing, and resolving problems. Understandably, management disciplines readily use the case study method to help students make well-founded and reasoned decisions they may likely encounter in the workplace. Some case studies may be classified as classic examples of a particular issue or theory of practice, thus taking on a kind of “best practices” status which is most instructive. Yet, despite all these noted pedagogical advantages, the case study method is most prized for its ability to elicit critical thinking skills in students by prompting reflection and thoughtfulness.

The known disadvantages of the case study method are few but, worth noting here for consideration. They specifically relate to learning style differences among students

where analytical ability may or may not be developed enough to be able to examine a case study either from multiple perspectives with varying outcomes or from a broader stance underscoring one main idea. In the first instance, students may suffer from a kind of myopia applying tunnel vision to the problem at hand, thus failing to think beyond one, and only one strategy for solution. The second shortcoming of significance could be best described as the inverse of myopia. Rather than review a case too narrowly, students fail to look at a case broadly for its overarching concepts and principles (Kirby et al., 2010). Regardless of these disadvantages, educators agree that the case study method has merit especially in professional schools keen on the application of theory.

Considerations in Applying the Case Study Method to the Ethical Practice of Reference

The application of the case study method to library and information science was primarily reserved to the area of library management. This seemed entirely reasonable given decision making was under the aegis of library managers. Leaning toward a managerial perspective of action, Hauptman aptly noted, “To *act* ethically is to consider basic principles, a course of *action*, and the potential results, and then to *act* in a responsible and accountable way” (p. 13, emphasis added). However, there are often instances when other library professionals, such as archivists, cataloguers, and reference librarians are required to make decisions and act ethically during the normal course of

their work. In fact, reference librarians may have to weigh competing values in reconciling the pros and cons of an ethical issue to act in their best professional judgment.

Understandably, there are considerations for applying the case study method for the ethical practice of reference which require cumulative preparation, reinforcement of reference attributes through planned activities, and a reasoned approach for analysis and discussion. Unlike business students working toward a solution to a problem situation through case study work, library science students learning the ethical practice of reference through case study work must be cognizant of the values and function of reference as these relate to professional codes of ethics. In this manner, library science students should first, be knowledgeable as to the values and functions of reference and connect these to the professional codes of ethics, before then tackling ethical dilemmas of reference. As an instructor, I covered the values and functions of reference in a class early in the semester as a foundational topic which was reinforced throughout the semester. Students were required to read a key article by Tyckoson (2001) who lists the values of reference and connects these to the functions of reference initially summarized by Green (1876). To assist students in readily making these connections, I created a diagram (Figure 1) organizing the eight values within the four broad functions of reference.

[INSERT FIGURE 1: Linking Functions to Values of Reference here]

In addition to familiarizing themselves with the values and functions of reference, students reviewed the *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* by the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the ALA in class with the instructor (last revised May 28, 2013). Since library science students have had

limited opportunity to practice reference, expecting them to be mindful of the many values, functions and behavioral characteristics of reference is admittedly a challenge.

Accordingly, there should be in-class activities and assignments which allow students to role play or observe real-world reference interactions. I have found asking students to participate in digital reference, where they have the benefit of obtaining a transcript of their transaction to analyze, to be one useful exercise for the purpose of active learning and reinforcement. *Conducting the Reference Interview* (Ross, Nilsen & Radford, 2009) is a useful source to help instructors design in-class activities and assignments regarding the myriad aspects of reference. This manual provided me with the impetus for creating key learning opportunities in the realms of practice and application.

Toward the end of the semester when the cumulative benefits of studying reference may be attained, a class on the ethical practice of reference should be held. Students are first introduced to the *ALA Code of Ethics* and its eight statements guiding ethical decision making. As outlined in the class textbook (Bopp & Smith, 2011), the four levels of ethical obligation in the *Code of Ethics* are: Individual, Organizational, Professional, and Societal. These four levels may assist students to think about how they would bear the *Code of Ethics* in mind for application. However, considering reference as primarily an interaction between librarians and patrons where relationships are fostered, the *ALA Code of Ethics* outlines the following principles which specifically guide reference services:

- I. We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.

- III. We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.
- VI. We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.

(ALA, 2008)

Once students have a shared knowledge base on the various characteristics, behaviors, and ethical codes of reference, they can begin to work with case studies on the ethical practice of reference.

Strategies for Writing Case Studies on the Ethical Practice of Reference

The literature on teacher education has been an ideal source of guidance on writing case studies on librarianship. In particular, Shulman's work (1992) presents a comprehensive overview of the case study models used in various professional disciplines which are worthwhile to detail here. While literature in the business discipline has been a helpful source in detailing the basics for writing case studies, adaptation to reference librarianship is difficult to impossible given that there are fundamental differences in the context and structure of case studies (Kirby et al., 2010). The two-part structure of the Harvard Business School model entails a first part which "presents the basic circumstances and background of the case . . . [with] alternate courses of action that might be taken." A thorough discussion by the class is next conducted under the direction of the instructor. Lastly, the second part is introduced which adds "an account of what the actors did . . . and what consequences followed" (Shulman, 1992, p. 11). In contrast, another model was

developed in 1946 by Harvard President, James B. Conant to teach an understanding of the processes of science using a narrative form of case study comprised of a beginning, middle, and end. While the business school model incorporates discussion as an essential aspect of the case study method, Conant's case study is intended for individual students to read in full as an accompaniment to a lecture-style class. Conant's model is meant to be a memorable story to promote recall among students since it is rich in context, set in a specific time and place where the wonders of science occur through trial and error.

Last among the models of case studies is the cases-and-commentaries model which resembles the case study format employed by Kirby et al. (2010) at the Department of Management of Texas State University. Told from one point of view, a problem is concisely presented, the analysis and strategies are detailed, and the resulting resolution or stalemate is revealed. The commentary (or "instructor's notes," according to Kirby et al.) follows the case, adding a measure of complexity which may offer alternate perspectives, possible consequences, or implications to consider (Shulman, 1992).

Of the three case study models presented, the ethical case studies written on librarianship are best characterized as a hybrid incorporating the first part of the Harvard Business School model followed by a series of questions and/or commentaries to help prompt analysis and discussion. Although many of these ethical case studies follow a narrative format, they are generally written in four parts: (1) context or background where the librarian and other protagonists may be presented; (2) the particular circumstance or situation is introduced; (3) the problem(s) or dilemma is noted where conflicts are defined; and (4) a set of questions or commentaries is listed.

When possible, ideas for the context of ethical dilemmas should derive from personal experience or observation. Of course, colleagues from the library profession may freely share stories with ethical components that are timely and perhaps even involve new reference venues or initiatives. It is also entirely possible that a story on the ethical practice of reference may appear in the library literature which could be adapted for a case study to be used for educational purposes. The North Carolinian publisher, McFarland & Company is known for publishing books in the field of information ethics as well as the *Journal of Information Ethics*, a known forum for discussion in the field. If time does not permit one to write ethical dilemmas on reference, instructors should seek out a timely book of case studies for adaptation (see Buchanan & Henderson, 2009).

Case studies for the ethical practice of reference are brief or approximately 1-2 pages long. The narrative should be told in order of occurrence of the event or situation. It can be told from any participant perspective, though it may be easiest for first-time case study writers to write from the perspective of the reference librarian. Participants should be identified by role and given proper names. In the very least, there should be a reference librarian and a library user identified. Bear in mind, participants may be active players in the narrative or inactive players referred to because they may have some direct involvement with the situation and how it may be resolved. Case studies should be as real-world and specific as possible without too many extraneous details which could divert the reader's focus from key issues. Without a full context for the situation, the case study may be difficult to analyze and discuss.

In the concluding paragraph, the case study should suggest the ethical dilemma in a manner which is unambiguous and conflicting. The student should be clear on the obvious choices of resolution/action with some margin for “thinking out of the box” to apply creative problem solving. It is recommended that writers include a list of basic questions to help initiate analysis and discussion. However, answering these questions only forms the basis of thorough analysis which could include references to applicable ethical codes, behaviors, values, and functions of reference.

For instructors, undertaking the task of writing case studies for the ethical practice of reference means they are keen to afford their students active learning opportunities. Like other instructional abilities, writing case studies may come easier to some and not to others. I have often found orally sharing an ethical dilemma with a colleague on an informal basis to be most helpful in getting started and working out any potential ambiguities. Whether well-developed or inadequate, all case studies can be tested for changes, major or minor. One planned activity could even be devised where students are asked to critique the case study for omissions or problems. In this way, case studies in need of improvement should never be regarded as failed attempts to be discarded. Certainly, there have been instances when instructors designed term projects or other assignments on writing a case study where students primarily drew from research or experience (Kirby et al., 2010; Richert, 1992). Much in the same manner, these case studies may be tested to ensure completeness and clarity through feedback elicited from fellow students. Despite the time and effort required to write a case study, it is a worthwhile endeavor offering current and future reference librarians the benefit of retelling, reflecting on, and analyzing ethical dilemmas.

Approaches to Analyzing and Discussing a Case Study

A significant part, if not, all of a class session should be devoted to analyzing and discussing case studies. For the sake of time, it is not recommended to assign more than three case studies. To give students a chance to independently reflect on and analyze a case study, instructors could easily assign one for homework which could be shared among students by posting in threaded discussion or the blog section of a course management system. For the purposes of understanding the many aspects of analysis, I will be referring to a short-version of a case study I wrote which is included in Figure 2 below:

[Insert Figure 2: Case Study here]

Although White (1992) and Zipkowitz (1996) are less valued for their dated case studies, they both offer useful approaches for careful analysis and discussion. Unlike Zipkowitz, White emphasizes, on more than one occasion, “Case studies should be taught primarily as *exercises in analysis and only secondarily as exercises in solution* because it is the technique and not the conclusion that really matters” (p. xvii, with existing emphasis). Table 1 compares the step-by-step approach of case analysis by White (1992) and Zipkowitz (1996).

[Insert TABLE 1: Comparison of Step-By-Step Approach to Case Study Analyses by White and Zipkowitz here]

A key difference between the two case study approaches is whether or not questions are included in the case study. For Zipkowitz, questions serve the important purpose of helping to “clarify the issues and provide a basis for focus in the case analysis”

(p. 9). However, White does not include questions with the case study but places these in a separate section at the back of his book, along with a summary and overview of key issues, presumably so students can independently conduct analysis. Nonetheless, in writing my own case studies, I have decided to include basic questions to serve as a catalyst for analysis and discussion. The following are the questions written for the case study from the inset:

1. How does Simon get Prof. Lindbrook to understand that by revealing student attendance at Research Consultation, he would be violating their confidentiality?
2. Is there any way to prevent Prof. Lindbrook from being disappointed with the service, or would she have been better off requesting a course-related lecture?
3. Can Simon preserve his relationship with Prof. Lindbrook or should he try to seek the help of a senior librarian such as the manager of Information Services or the Chief Librarian? If he cannot expect to receive favorable referrals from Prof. Lindbrook, what will he have to do?
4. Since Prof. Lindbrook read promotional material about this information literacy initiative, how seriously should Simon take her request for librarians to ensure that each student has 4 peer-reviewed articles? Should he take this as an opportunity to discuss IL with Prof. Lindbrook?

Another fundamental difference between White and Zipkowitz is the initial two steps of case analysis. While White suggests to begin with identifying the problem along with the “protagonists” or players involved, Zipkowitz approaches by asking students to define ethical “boundaries” as these may differ personally and professionally. Once the

problem and protagonists are identified, White next asks students to think about how the problem could have been avoided from the outset. This seems an entirely logical step from White's first step, yet preventing the occurrence of an ethical problem also requires students to view it for its unique ethical circumstances. On the other hand, Zipkowitz disjunctively asks students to shift from thinking about ethical boundaries of the case to next, mechanically sorting the important issues from the trivial issues of the case study. Despite these initial differences in approach, White and Zipkowitz proceed in a similar manner for the remaining three steps.

Although it may appear as a glaring omission not to identify the problem initially in a case study, Zipkowitz may believe problem and protagonist identification is an obvious part of the analysis process which does not need to be highlighted. Zipkowitz states, "In ethics as in other areas of our lives, if there are not two or more possible solutions to a problem it is no real problem at all" (p. 7). In fact, it would be inconceivable in any case analysis of ethical dilemmas of reference, not to identify the obvious problem and protagonists.

Conclusion

Striving beyond a common approach, instructors are having a positive impact on library school curricula which value active learning and the influential role of the practitioner as instructor. Theory and concepts have greater meaning when they are grounded in practice in all professional disciplines, especially library and information science. The case study method may be most prevalent in the curricula of business schools, but its use has merit in the ethical practice of reference where rote memorization or

recitation of ethical codes is a dilettante effort at instruction. The use of dated case studies may seem like a viable alternative to writing case studies, but the importance of timeliness in an ever-evolving code of ethics and reference practice demands instructors write their own. Whether you have the time or ability for writing case studies, trial and error can occur without consequence within the comfort of an academic environment. In the end, library instruction by practitioners that is learning-centered, is student-centered.

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Linking *Functions* to *Values* of Reference and Information Services

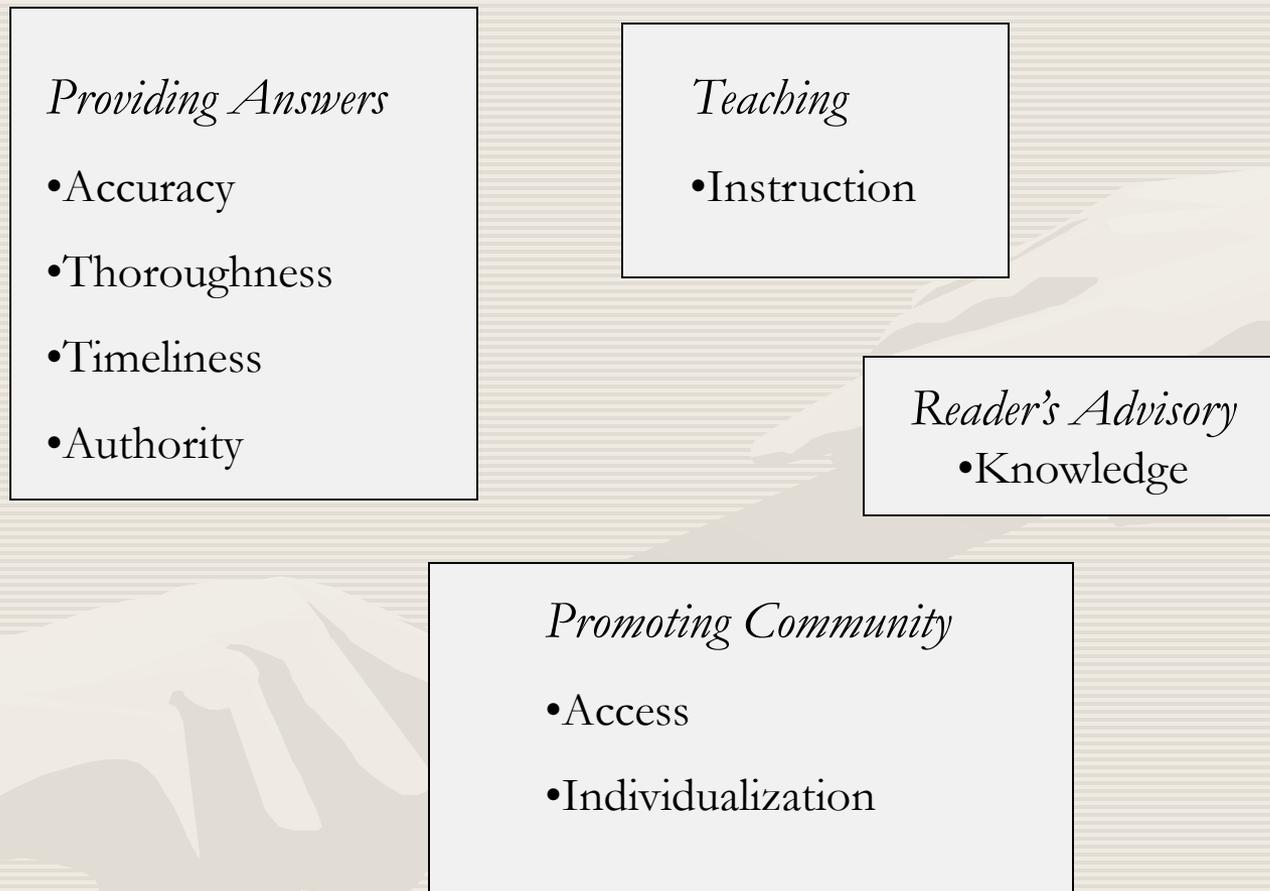


Figure 1 Linking Functions to Values of Reference

Case Study

This fall Simon was hired to work as an information services librarian at Tayler Library of Mount Hilten College. He felt privileged to be working at a “teaching library” which had the distinction of winning the Association of College and Research Libraries award, *Best Library in the Nation* last year. Simon was also eager to work with students and faculty at a moderately sized liberal arts college in the Boston area. He hoped to participate in some of the major library initiatives planned using funds obtained from an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant intended to help foster information literacy throughout the undergraduate curriculum.

Simon was appointed to serve as the new coordinator of “Research Consultations.” Research Consultations were longer reference interactions where patrons consulted one-on-one with a reference librarian on a research topic. Although last year this venue drew some students from English 1000, a writing-intensive course required of all first-year students, it did not resonate with other undergraduate disciplines with final research projects. In hopes of increasing use of this information literacy-oriented service across many disciplines, the library was given funds from the IMLS grant to develop an online sign-up form and database as well as promotional materials. Simon decided to contact faculty in courses where final research projects had been traditionally assigned, believing they might strongly encourage their students to sign up for the consultations.

When Prof. Lindbrook, a full-professor of Psychology, received the brochure announcing the Research Consultations, she decided to give Simon a call. Teaching PSY 2400, *Theories in Modern Psychology*, a required course for Psychology majors, Prof. Lindbrook found most students were “inept at conducting a literature review as well as consulting peer-reviewed articles in the field of psychology.” While she had occasion to invite librarians into her class to address these key information seeking issues, Prof. Lindbrook only saw a “moderate improvement” in student projects (a 5 page paper and 15-minute presentation). Working with Simon, Prof. Lindbrook decided to require her 20 students to sign up for a research consultation in lieu of scheduling a course-related lecture. Each student in the class would have to obtain at least 4 relevant peer-reviewed articles on their topic and submit an annotated bibliography.

Simon was initially excited at the prospect of working with other professors like Prof. Lindbrook whose endorsement of Research Consultations would likely lead to referrals. He knew the success of this information literacy initiative at Tayler library depended on such referrals, given that he had few established relationships with faculty as a new employee to the college. However, he took pause and had to sit down when he heard the voice mail message left by Prof. Lindbrook:

“Simon...I wanted to thank you for doing a masterful job of arranging research consultations for my students. While I anticipate they will need more help with research than you and the other reference librarians may be accustomed to offering, I am expecting every librarian to ensure each student obtains at least 4 peer-reviewed articles on their topic. Also, I have required all students to sign up for a research consultation as part of the assignment. However, I suspect some students will not attend their scheduled research consultation and simply ‘blow it off.’ I need you to provide me with a list of students who attended the research consultations by next Friday, the deadline for submitting their annotated bibliography, so I know who to penalize. An e-copy would suffice. Thanks again!”

Simon knew the importance of maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of library users regarding their use of library services and resources. He was having difficulty justifying the release of attendance records to Prof. Lindbrook since this could impact her students’ grades. Further adding to Simon’s anxiety, he was taken aback by Prof. Lindbrook’s insistence that librarians had to make sure her students obtained at least 4 peer-reviewed articles. He knew this was not only antithetical to the practice and philosophy of teaching students to be information literate and independently assume their own information seeking, but also went against the purpose of this IMLS funded initiative. As senior faculty, Prof. Lindbrook was not someone Simon wanted to disappoint, especially realizing how much he relied upon her referrals of the service to other faculty. How could Simon afford to ruin a relationship with senior faculty as a new librarian if this could also contribute to undermining the success of a new initiative of which he was in charge?

Steps	<i>White (1992, p. xvii)</i>	<i>Zipkowitz (1996, p. 10-11)</i>
1	What are the issues, problems and concerns that this case study presents? What are the individual concerns for the various protagonists mentioned? What are the issues for the library or its parent organization?	Consider[ing] the boundaries of our actions ..., those can be defined by examination of, and reaction to, situations we may be faced with. How would we, as individuals, behave in each of the roles presented in the case? How would our own professional and ethical preparation serve us if we were in this situation?
2	Could this problem have been avoided? If so, how?	Separat[ing] the important [poss. lasting effect] from the trivial [poss. negligible effect]...[issues of ethical consideration.]
3	In dealing with the present scenario, what are all the options you can see? What are the benefits, shortcomings, and risks of applying any of these options? What is likely to happen? What could happen in the worst-case scenario? What then?	Evaluating alternatives and their repercussions.
4	Which option have you decided to implement? Why this one rather than the others? What do you see as the likely consequences and how will you deal with them?	Determining the course of action with which you are comfortable, that is, that conforms to your own ethical standards and would allow you to function effectively in the future.
5	As a result of what you have decided to do, what is the impact on the library, or at least that part of it you are charged with managing?	Recogniz[ing] what effect the decisions have on your future choices, because decision making is cumulative.

TABLE 1: Comparison of Step-By-Step Approach to Case Study Analyses by White and Zipkowitz