CRJ Conversation: Guest Editors, Special Issue on Short Cases

NACRA
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Editor's Note: The following is a transcript of a conversation between me and the guest editors of the recent CRJ Special Issue on Short Cases: Grishma Shah and Meredith Woodwark. I am very grateful to Grishma and Meredith for taking on this responsibility, and the special issue, with eight excellent short and micro cases, is a testament to their hard work and expertise. Both are authors with cases published in CRJ and help mentor new case researchers as track chairs at the NACRA conference. The discussion below provides a different perspective, in that both guest editors were new to the CRJ editorial process a short time ago. In part because of this experience, however, Meredith Woodwark has taken on the role of associate editor at CRJ in 2024. The insights both provide are useful for new and experienced authors alike.

Eric Dolansky: Hi, Meredith. Hi Grishma. The special issue on short cases is more or less wrapping up, and the cases have been more or less finalized. Now, at the end of this process, what do you wish you'd known at the start?

Meredith Woodwark: The thing that surprised me the most, to be honest, is the number of authors who chose not to pursue revisions and resubmissions. I was really quite shocked by that. I thought that when we had the number of submissions that we had, and almost all of them had R&R's throughout the process (sometimes multiples), I thought that people would pursue them to the end. A lot of authors chose not to, and so I was really surprised by that. I thought there would be more people who were committed to pushing it through. I'm not sure what that says, because maybe there's something about how we need to change the process, or maybe it's just a function of having authors who weren't familiar enough with the process at CRJ; I'm not sure. But that's what surprised me the most, and I wish I'd understood that earlier on in the process.

Grishma Shah: I would say how differently the reviewers perceive a case. I was hoping that the reviews would come in, and there would be consensus – they would all say the same thing – like "oh yeah, this is what needs work, and if you fix this, we can move on." But I had seasoned reviewers who were totally on different pages with where they thought the case was. Some people thought it was almost ready. Others had a lot of criticism and thought it should just be rejected. I thought there was a lot of thinking-through and reconciliation that needed to be done, and figuring out exactly how to move forward, and that surprised me about the reviewers. It just seems that some people are harsher reviewers than others, and where CRJ is, I think I had to lean towards the harsher reviews, because we're developmental, we're like, "okay, let's take

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the hardest one and then work backwards on how to make this work so that we can move it forward."

Eric: This issue is about short cases. You both were chosen as special issue editors because of your experience as authors and reviewers. What makes a short case besides just length?

Grishma: I always think of a short case as something that is not a full class period, that I could do in a little bit less than a class period. Surprisingly, all of the instructor's manuals that I worked on were for full class period, even though it was a short case. That was a lesson for me, that a short case could cover a full class period or even more.

Before I went into this, I almost always thought that it has a vignette that you do in the beginning of the class or the end of the class to get to one or two quick learning objectives. So the question was: what do you think a short case is? I used to think it's something that you use as part of a class, and I've learned you can use it for the full class, and really address a lot of learning objectives through it.

Meredith: I think a short case is a case where the readers can grasp the context, and grasp the issue, really quickly. Typically it's a case where the context and the issue is familiar enough. People can get their heads around it pretty quickly and they just need to know the details.

Meredith: As an example, there was a case that I reviewed that had a go/no-go decision for a restaurant about whether or not to put in draft beer. People can grasp that really quickly, right? People know and understand the context of restaurants. They understand the issue of "are we going to have draft beer? Are we not going to have draft beer?" And it was asy to communicate the background of the issues and all you really had to do was fill in the specifics of that particular case. I think short cases on issues like that work really, really well. There are cases that I think can't be short, because they're about organizations or issues that are just so complex and unfamiliar to people that you wouldn't be able to communicate it in four pages. What's fascinating to me is that the short cases, despite the fact that the context and the issue could be really clear, doesn't mean that there's a lack of depth or learning to it. For the example of the draft beer or no draft beer case, the implications of that decision were amazing to me. There's no lack of depth or learning in a short case.

Eric: You also had micro case submissions – even shorter – and what were the challenges there? What are the benefits? Perhaps that fits more with the idea of vignettes that Grishma was talking about.

Grishma: I like micro cases, because one benefit to micro cases is you can hand it out at the beginning of the class. And I think one of the reasons for a short case special issue is: we understand the audience, and our audience is not into long form reading, many of them, and it is a challenge. And so micro case, if it hits the right learning objectives, it is ideal to hand out as they walk into the classroom and say: read it while everyone else is walking in, you have ten minutes. Then everyone is on the same page before you start the discussion.

Meredith: Yeah, I personally haven't used a lot of micro cases, yet, in my classes. One of the things that I think is a challenge with micro cases is that I don't know what the students' perception is of the value of the learning. I don't know whether students perceive micro cases as being too short to actually have a lot of value. I also don't know about the instructor adoption. I don't know how many instructors are using micro cases. I tend to plan my course and my classes with longer cases, but lots of people see the value in micro cases. I guess the thing that I worry about with micro cases is that I think there's a lot of value to reflection. I'm an introvert. I'm a slow thinker. I need time to process things as a student and a learner, so for me, I would want to have that reflection period between when I got the case and when we discussed it. As a learner I think I would struggle with "here's a case, let's debate it now." That's the challenging side of those cases, but I think there's absolutely a role for them, and there's lots of benefits. I think that maybe what I need to do as an instructor is balance out more: having both types of cases, rather than exclusively having the longer cases that I assign in advance.

Eric: Continuing the discussion about the length of the case, ever since I've been involved with case research there's been talk that the cases should be shorter. How much of that is length in terms of number of pages, and how much of that is in terms of content? Are there some cases, whether by topic or domain or target audience, that are just better suited to shorter cases? What do you think about this persistent discussion around shortening cases and reducing length?

Grishma: I have two things on this. One, I like the shorter cases because I find students are more likely to have read the whole case. No matter how hard we try, students have so many distractions and have a lot of issues now with attention span, considering all of the social media they're on, so a shorter case seems to work better with this audience because they've actually read the full thing. Two, I think that shorter cases, they're great for the yes/no decisions like the draft beer/no draft beer. But for evaluative cases where you're doing some brainstorming and some strategizing, longer cases are better because there's so much room, and so much value added by the fresh and new thoughts being brought in by the students. It's really about: is it a very strong decision-based case or is it a very strong evaluative case?

Meredith: I think short cases have their place, but there's a role for longer cases. As I said before, one of the ways that short cases work is because they're often about contexts that are easily understood. Part of the value in the case method, in my mind, is exposing students to industries and issues and organizations they've never encountered before, they don't understand, they've never heard of, and for which need a full understanding of the context. Part of the value of this is in being exposed to that new material, so I do think that there's still a role for longer cases. It is going to be a challenge to get students to read them, but there's a lot of interesting contacts, organisations, and questions out there. You can find things that are interesting enough to students and the case is well written. I don't want twenty-page cases like we used to have, but in the eight-to-ten-page range, I still think that's reasonable. There is a lot of value for students to expand their exposure to types of organizations through longer cases and the lack of familiarity means that the case has to be longer for people to understand. If we're going to stick with the convention of not requiring any outside research by students, then the data has got to be in the case. We can have the discussion of "is there still value in that convention" or "would it be helpful to have a kind of case

where we actually allow or expect students to go out and do external research." This would mean the case itself could be shorter, but that's a whole other debate.

Eric: Now that you've had the experience of guest editing an issue, what do you think authors should know as they start on a case writing project? You can make it specific to writing a short case, but also in general, what should authors know and what should they be thinking about?

Meredith: Authors need to know, from the get-go and particularly with short cases, that they are a lot harder to write. They look like "oh, it's easy right? Four pages and it's done." It's more of a challenge to write a short case in some ways. The other thing that authors need to really understand is that just because the case is short doesn't mean that the analysis is any less complex. The complexity of the analysis is still important for short cases. The message is: don't underestimate the level of work that's involved and the complexity of short cases.

Grishma: For authors, I would say that there's a tendency to 'info-dump' everything; what I have learned about this company, I'm going to dump into this case, and once I dump everything into the case, everyone will know everything there is to know about the company and get to the decision point. I've learned that info-dumping is not what you do in a case. Yes, you might know the executive, or you might know this person, but that doesn't mean that you should somehow get into the case everything they've ever told you. You could just leave out some things. I see a lot of cases where you have the opening vignette, and then there's info-dump for four pages, and then a decision. We never built the narrative for the decision, we just dumped info for a long time. For authors writing cases: really think through the information and build a narrative and a storyline around it, as opposed to just putting the information in.

Eric: This is your first time acting in an editorial capacity at CRJ. What do you know now that you didn't know before?

Meredith: One thing that really became clear to me is that the whole exercise of publishing is about perseverance. I remember my dissertation supervisor telling me that the key to getting something published is to wear the reviewers down. I totally get it. It really is an exercise in commitment and perseverance, which means you've got to want it, you have to want to get it. You've got to be able to put in the work, and just take the feedback and keep at it. For the cases that we see getting through to CRJ, the authors have demonstrated their commitment to the review process, and they've demonstrated their belief in their work, to the point that they've had probably one or two or more revisions more than they wanted to do. But they did it, and they got it done. The biggest thing is perseverance.

Grishma: I would agree, Meredith. I once heard or read that the only published authors are the ones that never gave up, the ones who didn't quit, and so many people who write get so frustrated with getting anything published that they quit at some point. Don't quit. I would say that that the editorial process was much harder than I had first imagined it to be. I'm a big picture person; writing a case is much easier for me because I'm a big picture person and I can see the whole thing. You also need to be very specific with detail and a lot of my coauthors are detail-oriented people. I do the big piece, and they do the detail-oriented parts of it (they're very nitpicky and specific, and you need

that person for sure). But that second role I had to play as special issue editor, and it was more difficult for me than I had anticipated. There was a learning curve I had to go through and say "okay, I need to find mistakes, I need to do this." I had some trouble with it, and it was something to teach myself.

Meredith: I have one other thing to add, which was that the reviewers catch a lot, and we have great reviewers at CRJ, but they don't catch everything, and experienced editors spot a lot of things that I missed.

Eric: I wouldn't necessarily say it's missing stuff. It's just looking for different things.

Meredith: Yes.

Eric: Continuing to discuss reviewers: part of your role was managing the review process and recruiting reviewers. Address some of the things you've talked about like differing opinions among reviewers. What was notable about that for you in terms of managing that process and acting as the go-between for the review team and the author team?

Meredith: I found that the general pattern was that authors who review for CRJ seemed to do better in the process, so there's a lot of value to authors to have the experience of being a reviewer. They understand the process better, they understand the perspective better, and they understand what to expect. Authors who had not reviewed for CRJ and were submitting for the first time had a lot to learn in the process. Understanding expectations is a big part of trying to figure out how to meet them.

Grishma: That's right. I had a very similar point, which was that the only time I've been through another review process with cases is for the NACRA conference. We have a large set of reviewers and the process by which we select NACRA cases to be at the round table is very different from CRJ. The best reviewers, the ones who had already published with CRJ, because they've been through the grinder before, they're like, "oh yeah, no, no, this is what needs to be done." My point was very similar to yours in the sense of expectations and that the journal is rigorous. At many points I have to go back and ask 'who should I pick for this case;' I was going through the people I knew through NACRA, and they weren't necessarily the best fit to review these cases.

Meredith: Yeah. Yes. The other thing I noticed was that, oh boy, there are some reviewers who are just rock stars that I don't know how the journal would work without them. There are just some people, there's a lot of them, who are just fantastic and you can count on them, and they do a great job, and they say yes, and they're on time and they're just fantastic. The amount that they contribute to the journal is really quite phenomenal, and I don't know if everybody really understands that. Being in the editor position for the first time, I really saw that clearly. There are just some rock stars that make the journal. and I think they deserve a lot of credit.

Eric: I couldn't agree more. You have talked about how authors can learn from being in the review process and reviewers are stronger when they're published authors. How has this experience changed the way you're going to approach your own research in the future?

Grishma: I'm going to follow Meredith's advice, which is to not give up. Just keep going until: you get all of the feedback you need, incorporate all the feedback, and someone says yes.

Meredith: You're going to wear them down, right?

Grishma: Yeah, wear them down.

Meredith: I have learned in this process how much you can accomplish with a short case. My go-to case writing: initially, I tend to be wordy, and I tend to want to include data that probably doesn't need to be included. My cases, when I first started writing cases, were always at least eight pages or longer, and some of them are even longer than that. I have been struck by how much you can accomplish in a short case and how it does not actually detract from the understanding of the issue or the complexity of the analysis. I'm going to try to become a shorter case writer than I have been.

Eric: Great. Is there anything else that surprised you a great deal about this process?

Grishma: I have found that we were actually much more developmental than expected. We've always said we're developmental, but we really did take the time for every submission to say "we will consider moving this forward if you do this, but this is a lot of work." We also said "if you don't want to do the work, it's fine, but it's a lot of work if you want to move this forward." I know that there's a lot of rigor at CRJ, but it's also very developmental at the same time. If you want a case published in the journal, there will be people, reviewers, editors who will help you through the process. And I think some of it is really just asking for help.

Meredith: Yes. The other thing that surprised me in the process was that I had some alternate format cases. I had at least one alternate format case submitted, which was great and I thought it had a lot of promise, but I don't think it made it through, and I don't think that it's entirely the authors to blame on that. Alternative format cases are more challenging to put through a review process like this, because, after all, if we're just working from text, it's really easy to revise, right? If you're putting forth an initial submission, you can revise it as much as you want. In an alternate format case, like a comic book kind of case or a video kind of case, the revisions are actually a lot more challenging to do. I'm not sure that our review process is going to allow a lot of alternate format cases to get through, because you have to redraw your case or reshoot your case or reprogram your simulation or whatever. It's a lot more work than just revising text. One conversation we might want to have is: if we have different format cases, what is the best way to do that? Should we have an initial discussion with authors first, about fleshing out the idea and giving them some advice? Maybe rather than having them commit to fully drawing up the case or fully video shooting the case, they could block it out in text first and then have it reviewed that way. Get some feedback initially so that by the time they're committing to doing the drawing or the video shooting the authors are a lot closer to what the end format should be. I would like to see more alternative format cases. I was very happy to see some come in, but I'd like to see some get to the end of the process and be published.

Eric: OK. Can you tell me about one specific thing that happened? One event along the way; it could be a big thing or a small thing. During your time as special issue editor, what was one thing that's really going to stick with you?

Grishma: I had a reviewer selected, and they've been with CRJ for a long time, and they are very good. They missed the deadline a couple times, and I said, "hey, I reassigned this, don't worry about it." And then they wrote back a personal note about how her partner had a sudden medical issue. I said, "forget it; you don't have to do this for me." And they replied, "no, they're going home in four days and after that I'm going to send you the review." I responded "really, you don't have to do that," but they were committed, answering, "I know I'm late, it's on my radar, I just wanted to take care of this family health emergency, and then I'll still submit the review." And they did! Not just that review, but also followed through and submitted reviews for the revised versions. I was amazed at the level of commitment some reviewers have, and the commitment that they have to CRJ. That was pretty profound for me, because to be honest, if I was in their shoes, I'd be like, "no, I have a lot going on. Could you please reassign it?"

Meredith: I had a couple of cases that were from either new authors or new-to-CRJ authors. The reviewers were not super supportive initially. In the first round, it was a tough decision about whether to give them a revise and resubmit decision and give them the chance, or whether to say, "this is just not going to get there, you should move on." I decided when in doubt, it's more consistent with the developmental philosophy of the journal to give people a chance. There were a couple of cases where I decided to give people a chance, and they really stepped up. They took the feedback, they looked at it as a developmental opportunity, and they really persevered. I was really glad that I gave them a chance because they took advantage of that. The initial submission is not always indicative of where the case ends up; it can be quite a big leap from initial submission to where the authors can take it. It's pretty amazing to see, and it's rewarding to see.

Eric: Thank you. Do you have any final thoughts about the issue, the cases you managed personally that will appear in the issue, or advice for authors?

Meredith: The other thing that I was surprised at was: because it was my experience as an author with CRJ, I always told the authors that they're welcome to reach out to me if they had any other questions or if something wasn't clear. I was surprised that nobody did, really. I tried to make it clear that it was welcome, and we all have had these reviews where you're scratching your head about it and think "I don't know what they mean; this reviewer says this, the editor says this, I don't know what to do about it." I think maybe people don't understand that we're sincere when we say you can reach out to us for clarification if you need it. Don't hesitate, please reach out and we can help you. Sometimes it saves people a lot of time.

Grishma: I would agree with that. CRJ is very developmental and yes, there are standards to be met, but persevere, and reach out, and do everything you need to do if you're very serious about getting published in the journal.

Eric: I agree with all of that. Is there anything else you want to say? Anything you want me to add to any of your previous responses?

Meredith: I just want to say thanks for the opportunity because it was enjoyable. It was fun, and I learned a lot, and it showed me how much I still have to learn in the craft of making excellent cases, whether from the author side or from the editing and reviewing side. So I'm just grateful for the opportunity..

Grishma: Yes. Same with me. I'm also grateful for the help I received, because there were a lot of times where I found I had a lot to learn as well.