

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

From isolation to collaboration through lesson study

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Reference data:

Gillies, H., McMillan, B., Stillwell, C. & Waller, T. (2008). From isolation to collaboration through lesson study. In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT 2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

As educators it is often difficult to find time to conduct research, let alone develop materials appropriate for lessons. In most cases, practitioners think they must do these activities alone because no one else has their specific needs in the classroom or areas of interest for research. However, a highly collaborative method of conducting research and developing lessons and materials can be found in the process of lesson study. Recent application of the lesson study process suggests that it may not only be an effective tool for teacher development and research, but it can also help with developing materials that students find engaging. This paper will provide a description of the lesson study process and how it was conducted at a Japanese university. Furthermore, the paper will focus on the benefits gained in terms of professional development as illustrated by quotes from teacher-participants' teaching journals and meeting transcripts. Lastly, some suggestions for adapting lesson study to various contexts will be given.

教師の仕事には 研究する時間はもちろんのこと、教材を発展する暇も普段はあつたりない。他のきょうしの文脈と興味が自分のと違うと思つてしまい、ほとんどの教師は一人で自分の教材を作らないといけなかつと思つ込む。しかし最近の研究授業の世界中の応用を見ると協力的な教員のプロフェッショナル・デベロップメントと研究は効果的方法ださうです。本論では研究授業のやり方と日本の大学でどういふふうを実現されたとせつめいする。参加した教師の日記からの引用や会議の書写や生徒の反応を基にしてプロフェッショナル・デベロップメントとした価値を表す。

Background

For years, Japanese public school teachers have been required to participate in the process called *kenkyuu jyugyou* or “lesson study” as a method of professional development. In Japan, approaches to lesson study include: focusing on just one particular grade with a group of teachers in one school, having a school-wide focus across a curriculum, or producing a conference-like event that has been known to draw thousands of teachers from across the nation to one particular school to observe a refined lesson study demonstration (Watanabe, 2002). So what exactly is involved in adopting lesson study as a means of professional development?

In the Japanese model, lesson study is a continual working process that usually involves four to six teachers who work collaboratively toward a particular goal. Generally, the group meets for 10 to 15 hours over a period of one month. The process can be found to follow some variation of the following eight steps (Fernandez, 2002; Lewis, 2002; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999):

- (1) Defining the problem
- (2) Planning the lesson
- (3) Teaching the lesson
- (4) Evaluating the lesson and reflecting on its effect
- (5) Revising the lesson
- (6) Teaching the revised lesson
- (7) Evaluating and reflecting, again
- (8) Sharing the results

Steps 5-7 may be repeated a number of times in order to refine the lesson with the group ultimately writing up their findings to build a knowledge base for other practitioners that includes a detailed description of the lesson design process and teacher reflections (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Fernandez, 2002). The hope is that these shared lessons and reflections—and indeed the promotion of lesson study itself as a means of professional development—will ultimately improve student learning.

The purposes of lesson study are for teachers to develop a critical lens, allowing them to see the learning process from the perspective of their students; to consider deeply the materials being taught and how the materials meet standards and fit within a curriculum; and to reflect upon their own teaching styles and methods, which will eventually help them to become better teachers (Fernandez, Cannon, & Chokshi, 2003).

Lesson study process at KUIS

Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Chiba, Japan, is a language-focused university established in 1987. Its English Language Institute (ELI) was created to help students improve their English skills university-wide. Instructors teach within three different departments in the ELI. The main differences from the usual context in which lesson study is conducted in Japan are that (a) the students were at university level and (b) the instructors were from a variety of English-speaking countries—two Americans, one Canadian, and one British. All three of the different departments within the ELI were represented by these four group members. Since this lesson study project was initiated

by the teacher-participants, they enjoyed the freedom of being able to adapt the lesson study process to fit their needs.

The project was conducted over a full Japanese academic year, with five teachings of the lesson; three of the teacher-participants (Tara, Hamish, and Brian) each taught the lesson once, while the fourth team member (Christopher) taught the lesson twice. The lesson study group met for planning and feedback once a week almost every week for about an hour and a half. After one or more group planning sessions, the teacher who would be teaching the upcoming lesson took responsibility for writing up the final lesson plan to be used. That teacher then taught the lesson while all other team members observed and took notes. After reflecting on the lesson, the team met again to share feedback and ideas for improvement, which lead to the collaborative creation of a further refined version of the lesson plan, and so on. This cycle of meetings and lessons is represented in Figure 1.

From isolation to collaboration

Collaboration is often absent in the teaching profession. While mentoring programs and other forms of peer support have become much more widespread in recent years, many novice teachers still report that they plan and teach lessons alone and that they are expected to be prematurely expert and independent (Kardos & Johnson, 2007). Indeed, for two of the teacher-participants, this lesson study project provided one of their first opportunities to work closely with other teachers on a long-term project. Hamish remarked:

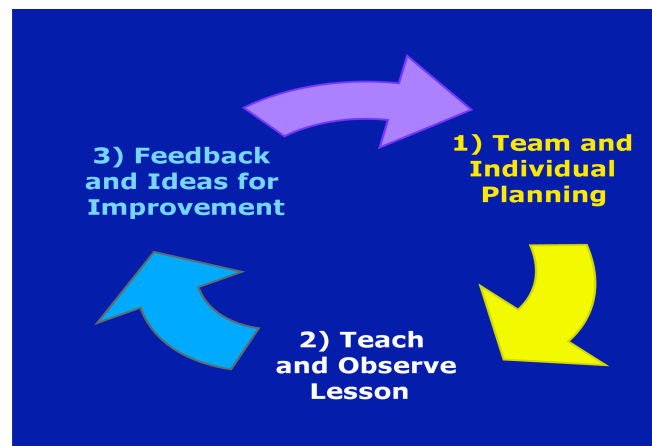


Figure 1. The Lesson study cycle at KUIS

Since team-teaching during my CELTA course at the very start of my ELT career, participating in the lesson study project marked only the second experience of working together with my teaching colleagues to develop a lesson. Most of my teaching career has been spent working in near isolation: preparing my classes by myself, delivering them thus, and reflecting on them thus. The reasons for this are various, but foremost perhaps has been the nature of my various work environments. These have featured minimal contact with peers, and also minimal time for such contact. At KUIS however, there has been both proximity with peers and a certain amount of time in the work schedule for meeting with those peers for such collaboration.

Brian also welcomed the chance to collaborate with colleagues as a way of enhancing his development as a teacher:

The type of collaboration and support offered by lesson study was largely missing from my first few years of teaching French immersion in Canada. In my day-to-day teaching, I had little opportunity to discuss teaching ideas in detail or to observe other teachers. Like many new teachers, I struggled on my own each day to plan lessons and create materials. I realize now that collaboration is key to my professional development. Through this experience I have also developed the ability to work more effectively with others, which will allow me to benefit even more from future collaborative projects.

Teachers at KUIS are fortunate in that the professional culture is one in which teachers benefit from frequent and meaningful interaction among faculty members (Kardos & Johnson, 2007). KUIS teachers from different departments often work together to develop materials, conduct peer observations, and conduct research; this collaboration is encouraged by department supervisors, although in many cases it is the teachers themselves who take the initiative to lead and join these collaborative projects, as was the case with the present lesson study project. KUIS teachers also have a certain amount of flexibility built into their work schedules, making it possible for lesson study team members to meet and observe each other's classes.

Collaborating to learn and learning to collaborate

Working on this lesson study project provided an opportunity for teacher-participants to develop and strengthen their teamwork skills, as they learned how to work together effectively and learn as part of a team of teachers. Brian commented:

Many excellent ideas resulted from team members thinking out loud during group brainstorming sessions. I noticed on many occasions that one of us would propose something that was just the beginning of an idea; others would then build on it, or sometimes take the idea in a different direction. This “spitballing” of ideas led to many valuable improvements in the design of the lesson and it was easier for me to express an idea, however basic, knowing that my fellow team members might take it and run with it.

With four group members, it was sometimes difficult to arrive at a consensus; however, differences of opinion were viewed positively, as an opportunity for growth. Team members often pushed each other to think things through and rethink assumptions. On several occasions, ideas that met with very little support initially were later brought up again and received more positively. The group found that it was important to remain open to new ideas and really listen to other team members during meetings; occasionally paraphrasing what others had said helped to ensure that ideas were understood. Humor also proved to be a highly effective team building tool. However, when team members did disagree, care was taken to do so respectfully and without taking things too personally. There may be many “right”

ways to achieve a goal, given that teachers may have their own personal beliefs, preferred ways of doing things, and different teaching situations.

Peer observations

Lesson study also provides experience of peer observation as a means of professional development. According to Mann's (2005) piece on the state-of-the-art in professional development, peer observation plays an important part in many current practices, such as team teaching and peer coaching. Therefore, the experience of observing and being observed that comes from the lesson study process could prove quite valuable in paving the way for future professional development opportunities.

Peers assessing a peer's teaching can be a very sensitive business. As Hamish noted, "In ESL/EFL teaching, being observed is usually associated with performance appraisal by one's superiors, and is therefore a very nerve-racking experience." An added benefit of the lesson study process was that it provided a safe context within which to reflect on teaching and learn from one another. As a general rule, discussions did not go very far into individual, personality-based teaching behaviors, because the target of attention was meant to be the lesson. This narrow focus could at times be liberating—freeing the participants to talk about problems that came up in terms of the lesson's delivery and how it was received by the students, and to offer possible solutions without having to worry about offending someone. As Hamish reported:

I found myself to be much less self-conscious than I expected, and I would put this down to the circumstances of the observation: first, I was being observed by...a group of peers most of whom I had already observed teaching, and worked closely with; second, I was not solely responsible for the lesson I was delivering, it being a product of collaboration, and therefore I was able to take the "self" out of it in terms of its success or failure; and third, due to the emphasis on process rather than product, and constant cycle of trial development, there was not the feeling that "everything rested on that single lesson."

Because there was an understanding that the teacher was not to be evaluated, but rather the lesson, and because all participants shared responsibility for that lesson, the experience of being observed by peers became a much more beneficial experience than might otherwise have been the case.

Affiliation, professionalism, progress, and development

As emphasized already, teaching as a profession can be very isolating, especially when teaching English abroad. Furthermore, research shows that most ESL/EFL teachers are concerned that their profession is not recognized as "a profession" (Pennington, 1991). Such perceived isolation and devaluation of one's professional identity can lead to a decline in one's standards of teaching performance, for example simply recycling the same lessons, regardless of whether they are effective or not; and that in turn can lead to

boredom, disillusionment, and demotivation. To avert such an undesirable state of affairs, there needs to be an emphasis on work practices which promote a sense of affiliation and professionalism, and consequently a sense of progress and development; A brief extract from Hamish's journal illustrates in more detail how such work practices might realize themselves:

Being part of a team allowed me a sense of affiliation and professionalism, the feeling of being part of 'something bigger'—I felt reassured of my identity as a teacher by working closely with fellow teachers, whose values and objectives matched my own. I guess you could call it a sense of solidarity.

The collegiality and progress to which Hamish refers expressed itself in this case as the sharing of experiences and ideas, problems and solutions. Therefore, lesson study can reinvigorate a teacher's overall practice, and this can only have a positive effect on the quality of teaching that the learners receive. As Hamish goes on to explain:

The sense of progress was not restricted to my participation in the immediate Lesson Study project, but also flowed into other areas of my teaching: most concretely in the form of teaching techniques and activities, but also in a deeper sense of reflection on my practices as a teacher.

In conclusion, a sense of affiliation and professionalism, in other words feeling a valued part of a valued group, is both good for teachers and in consequence good for learners.

Responsibility and ownership

Being a member of any peer group gives one a responsibility to the group, the responsibility to make an equal contribution towards the group's objectives. The following quote from Hamish illustrates the complex psychological dynamics involved:

Working within a group brought with it a sense of responsibility to the other members; though this felt on the one hand as a kind of external motivation, based on my aversion to loss of face due to letting the team down, it was equally internal in that I was creating a positive self-image, as a contributing member of a team.

At the same time, this sense of responsibility has a "flip-side," which is a sense of ownership, the right to feel satisfaction and benefit from the group's achievement of its objectives, and hence the satisfaction of delivering a higher quality of service to the learners; as Tara explains:

Lesson study provided the opportunity for everyone to have a stake in the development of the lesson for their particular class, which promoted taking ownership in a balanced way over the materials developed and our own professional growth.

Thus collaboration is a two-way street of rights and responsibilities which can enhance collaborators' motivation towards their project.

Fresh perspective

The teacher-participants found that their experience with the project gave them fresh perspectives onto their own practice. Tara remarked that “this regular time to share ideas and develop skills has challenged me to keep a fresh lens from my students’ perspectives as well as my own as a teacher.”

Chris observed that “the process has given me new perspectives on some previously cherished teaching beliefs.” These experiences seem to stem in particular from the sharing and negotiation between peers through which the lesson plan is continually refined; thus this collaboration creates ripples which “wash over,” as it were, the individual teacher’s practice beyond the confines of the Lesson Study project. Moreover, this process seems to be facilitated by the shared responsibility for the lesson, in that it aids a sense of objectivity, or as Chris remarked, “This lesson study helped me step outside of myself as a teacher, to separate the lesson from the delivery.”

Addressing teacher concerns**Time**

Time management was a serious concern. The teachers who participated in this project had to juggle their schedules in order to fit lesson study meetings and observations in between lessons, preparation, grading papers, other research work, and meetings. As Chris noted,

I was a little skeptical of the value of dedicating so much time to such a small part of my workload (one single lesson out of a year’s worth of

teaching), and it wasn’t always easy to attend the frequent meetings.

However, Chris soon found that the process of lesson study provided ways for the work to be distributed among the group members:

It has helped that the workload and responsibility have been naturally distributed—the teacher for each coming trial naturally takes the reins, but with the support of the remaining group members.

Because of time concerns, it was especially important for the meetings to be run efficiently while also giving all team members the opportunity to make meaningful contributions.

Although the teachers had blocked out the same time for meetings every week, the frequency of these meetings and the lesson observations were flexible, often needing to be adjusted to work around inevitable conflicts. At times this meant having conversations over breakfast or lunch. Emails were exchanged to continue the sharing of ideas in the time between meetings, and these discussions often played a part in reducing the necessity of coming together face-to-face.

Discussion management

The ability to paraphrase became an important skill for discussion management insofar as it promoted deeper understandings of differing viewpoints by slowing the conversation sufficiently to allow individuals to connect ideas and closely consider what was being said. Furthermore, it strengthened the bonds among the participants as it communicated interest in colleagues’ input. Although the group did not encounter a great deal of conflict in their

discussions, Garmston and McKanders (2006) note that the practice of paraphrasing can also be useful for resolving disputes in such contexts.

Initiating a new lesson study

One concern for many newcomers to lesson study is the issue of having peer observers in the classroom. In order to mitigate the possible negative effects of such classroom intrusions, it can be important for participants to reach consensus on the etiquette for the observations. Important questions to consider are which parts of the lesson are to be observed, what nature of data collection is desirable, whether or not the observers are free to move about the room, and how the observer's presence is to be explained to the students. In addition, it is advisable that the lesson study participants collaborate as much as possible on the lesson's creation prior to a trial, so that the responsibility for its success is diffused over the whole group. As Hamish noted, this can increase an observed teacher's comfort with scrutiny as any criticisms that come up will be focused on the shared lesson more than on the teacher's performance.

Teachers in other environments may find it somewhat more challenging to organize lesson study projects. One way of dealing with time concerns could be video recording the lessons to make it possible to observe the classroom without worrying about scheduling constraints. Another concern is the degree to which the professional culture of the school values and supports peer collaboration. In professional settings where such collaboration is not likely to happen automatically, teachers themselves can and should take responsibility for initiating and leading professional

development activities. The spirit of collaborative professional development through lesson study was perhaps best captured in a few lines from Brian's journal:

My advice, especially to new teachers, would be: Do not wait for others to ask you to join a collaborative project such as lesson study. Instead, invite two or three colleagues to join you. Do not hesitate—initiate!

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