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Learning Through Lesson Study

BY BETSY VANDEUSEN-MACLEOD

"Lesson Study ... is a process for creating deep and grounded reflection about the complex activities of teaching that can then be shared and discussed with other members of the profession" (Fernandez & Chokshi, 2002, p. 134).

Teacher professional development is one of the most complex and pervasive challenges facing education today. The past decade alone has witnessed many school reform initiatives that have targeted teacher quality, teacher leadership, and teacher research as integral components of the change that is needed in the working system of education (U.S. Department of Education, 2001; Ball & Cohen, 1999). A report that analyzed survey data from 3 years of analyses of early reading interventions (St. John, Manset, Chung, & Worthington, 2001) found considerable evidence to support the needs of in-service teachers to collaborate in order to improve educational outcomes for students. This meta-analysis also identified these key features of successful professional development: it is school-based, followed up in classrooms by means of peer coaching or demonstration lessons, collaborative, embedded in the daily lives of teachers, and, most importantly, focused on student learning. The overriding theme of this type of successful professional development is that teachers undertake professional growth as a central responsibility of teaching, not as an adjunct to their work (Elmore & Burney, 1999).

In this article, I discuss challenges to teacher learning in professional development contexts, briefly review several professional development models that incorporate live teaching or demonstration lessons into their programs, and describe Lesson Study, an effective approach to professional development that is widely used in Japan and becoming increasingly used in the United States. Finally, I offer concluding thoughts about the place of Lesson Study in teacher professional development in the United States.

Challenges to teacher learning

The research presents many challenges to this ideal view of teacher in-service learning. One challenge in education is that teachers rarely draw from a shared knowledge base to analyze and refine practice (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002). This ongoing

challenge has resulted in translation difficulties when education researchers attempt to shape knowledge into forms teachers can use to improve practice and difficulties in communicating and demonstrating the importance of the craft of teaching to researchers. In their book, *The Teaching Gap*, Stigler and Hiebert (1999) ponder this question: Is it possible to blend the personal craft knowledge of teachers into a trustworthy knowledge base that can be accessed and shared widely in the profession? They also write extensively on the crucial linkage between the dimensions of practitioner knowledge and the public sharing of this knowledge base. Citing Karl Popper's (1972) *worlds of knowledge* as an important schema regarding public sharing, they emphasize that, for too long, the isolation and privacy common to teaching have had a detrimental effect on the field on many

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levels. Popper's 3 worlds of knowledge are as follows: knowledge of physical and real world object and experiences (World 1), individual's knowledge and skills (World 2), and shared ideas treatable as public objects that can be shared and accumulated (World 3). Law and medicine are fields that draw upon all three worlds, from everyday practice, to individual knowledge and skills, and to case law and case literature that are shared, published, and archived for the betterment of all. This also allows for refinement, replication, refutation and enhancement of existing ideas and knowledge. In education, we live almost exclusively in Worlds 1 (involved with students and the curriculum) and 2 (creating individual professional knowledge and reflection). For knowledge to be public, it must be represented in a way that can be communicated among colleagues and in the community at large. In this way, it is shareable, open for discussion, verification, and modification (Hiebert et al., 2002). In education, this means implementing professional development models that incorporate the observation, analysis, and archiving of live teaching in real classrooms as a part of the learning model.

Existing professional development models

Literacy consistently ranks as one of the highest priorities on the national education agenda (U.S. Department of Education, 2001; Michigan Department of Education, 2002), particularly literacy acquisition in grades kindergarten through third grade. Several widely used literacy professional development models incorporate live teaching or demonstration lessons into their programs. These include Early Intervention in Reading (Taylor, 2001), Reading Recovery (Clay, 1982), the Literacy Collaborative (2001), and the Early Literacy and Learning Model (Fountain & Wood, 2000). Each of these models is designed to help teachers work with the lowest performing students and to accelerate literacy gains.

Early Intervention in Reading.

Early Intervention in Reading (EIR) incorporates extensive training, web-based instruction, conference calls, coaching, observation, and demonstration les-

sons in this 9-month professional development program for K-4 teachers (Taylor, 2001). The program strives to develop teachers' knowledge and skills to implement a research-based, small group intervention for struggling readers. In addition to initial training sessions, EIR consists of 45 web-based modules that use text as well as multimedia clips of effective instruction. Another key feature of EIR is the use of monthly conference calls with an EIR trainer in which the participating teachers share 5-minute video segments of their teaching. The program archives demonstration lessons on the EIR web site (www.eireading.com). These lessons serve as centerpieces around which teachers reflect and analyze their teaching practices. EIR has 12 years of evidence that participating students in grades K-4 significantly outscore comparison students. In addition, studies at each grade level show high percentages of EIR students at or above expected reading levels (Killion, 2002; Taylor, 2001; Hiebert & Taylor, 2000).

Reading Recovery®

Reading Recovery® has also had success with shared, public knowledge (Killion, 2002; Novick, 2002). One of the features of this ongoing professional development is the "behind-the-glass" teaching lesson that occurs three times in a teacher's initial training year and once each subsequent year of active Reading Recovery teaching. These are live lessons where teachers bring students to a training site and, behind a two-way mirror, conduct a normal lesson while peers and the teacher leader watch and discuss the teaching and learning of the lesson, paying close attention to the student responses and the "on-the-run" teacher decision making that happens in the reality of this 30-minute lesson. In addition, some Reading Recovery sites have viewing available in a separate room for parents and invited guests (principals, superintendents, local media, legislators, etc) so that the wider community can also observe the lesson (Clay, 1982). Following the lesson, it is debriefed by collaborative inquiry as the teacher describes the lesson from her perspective and engages with colleagues for feedback and suggestions. Reading Recovery has 17 years of evidence indicating 81 percent of the students receiving a full program perform

within or above the average range of the first-grade reading level (Herman & Stringfield, 1997; Killion, 2002; Pinnell, 2000).

The Literacy Collaborative

The Literacy Collaborative is a 5-year professional development program that utilizes a literacy coordinator who, after a year of intensive training, works closely with elementary building-based elementary colleagues by means of coaching, study groups, action research, and demonstration teaching (Literacy Collaborative Research Report, 2001). In the training year, literacy coordinators receive extensive training in both teaching young children and structuring training for adults; they also teach the literacy block, and the school staff observes this teaching in the literacy coordinator's classroom. In subsequent years, the literacy coordinator coaches individual teachers, conducts study groups, and provides on-going demonstration and modeling of key literacy components in classrooms. The Literacy Collaborative has 51 sites with 4 or more years of data showing an average increase of 6.8 normal curve equivalents (Gates-McGinitie, 4th edition) in second grade cohorts participating in the program (Killion, 2002; Literacy Collaborative Research Report, 2001; Williams, E.J., 2002).

The Early Literacy and Learning Model (ELLM)

The Early Literacy and Learning Model (ELLM) is a professional development model that involves literacy coaches who work with classroom teachers and the program focuses on 4-6 year olds in childcare settings and pre-kindergarten-1st grade classrooms (Fountain & Wood, 2000). In addition, the program is a collaborative effort that includes area businesses, university faculty, educators, and family and community support. ELLM trainers provide instruction for coaches by means of coaching, demonstration lessons, and curriculum development; coaches, in turn, provide this support to classroom teachers. ELLM research demonstrates significant improvement in the reading readiness of participating students when compared to national norms (Fountain & Wood, 2000; Killion, 2002; Wood & McLenore, 2001).

Central to each of these literacy professional development models is the discussion, feedback, and

application of colleague feedback generated from the observation of teaching in action with real students and in real situations. Lyons (1994) describes this interactive feedback as building chains of reasoning where the contributions of individuals build on one another and the whole group is lifted to a new level of understanding. This collaborative inquiry is the articulation of the ideas and exploration of possibilities rather than the rote answering of questions. In addition, these models recognize the importance of sharing authentic teaching with colleagues in education, and in some programs, with a wider community audience.

Despite encouraging models of professional development such as the ones reviewed above, finding a professional development models or mechanisms that can have similar and more universal effects on the wider, diverse education community has been difficult. As National Staff Development Council Executive Director Dennis Sparks reflects, "Unfortunately, in far too many schools, the gap between (content and process) knowledge and common practice widens each year as the research base increases, and professional development, as it is experienced by teachers, remains virtually unchanged" (as cited in Killion, 2002, p. 7).

As Sykes (1999) indicates, obtaining greater long-term results for teachers and students requires professional development that is part of a larger, job-embedded comprehensive model that will transform teaching and increase learning. Many districts, acknowledging the importance of collaborative time for teachers, have provided the time for collaboration with initiatives such as block planning time for grade levels, but, in general, no consistent structure is in place to maximize the use of this time for improving teacher learning and student outcomes.

Lesson Study

A promising professional development initiative, Lesson Study, could help to provide the process and structure necessary to help the education community sharpen the focus and energy of its stakeholders on teaching and learning. The key features of the Lesson Study process are the planning, observing

and refining of lessons by peers in a collaborative process. These lessons are then shared with the education community by means of demonstration, publication, electronic archives, or open houses so that practitioner knowledge can be discussed and collected to create a larger professional knowledge base. Lesson Study has the potential to integrate practitioner knowledge, shared knowledge, and public examination in an authentic way that seeks to improve the teaching and learning in our schools. In addition, instructional systems technology can be used in Lesson Study, both to aid in the sharing of information and in the integration of technology in demonstration lessons.

What is Lesson Study?

Lesson Study is an intensive, school-based professional development initiative widely used in Japan. It first came to light in the video study that was part of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), where teachers in 41 different countries were videotaped teaching math and science lessons (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). It has emerged as a strategy for change and improvement that seems to fit well with a cultural activity such as teaching (Purcell-Gates, 1995; Stepanek, 2001). The core belief of Lesson Study is that developing new approaches requires deep thought, inquiry, and collaboration with a sharp collective focus on *teaching* rather than *teachers*. Another key feature is keeping students at the center of the activity. Catherine Lewis, professor at Mills College in Oakland, California, and an integral part of their Lesson Study Research Group, sums up how Lesson Study is perceived by Japanese teachers: “[They] say that the most powerful part of the Lesson Study is that you develop the vision to see children. So you’re really watching how children are learning, and learning to see things you didn’t see before: their thinking and their reactions” (Lewis, 2002a, p. 9). Research lessons, which are actual classroom teaching episodes, are a key vehicle for leading this initiative and the collaborative inquiry. Currently, Lesson Study is being implemented and researched in 26 U.S. states and at four sites in Michigan: The University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan University, Grosse Pointe Public Schools,

and Lake Shore Public Schools. In addition, two universities have established research sites for Lesson Study: Teacher’s College, Columbia University (www.tc.columbia.edu/lessonstudy) and Mills College (www.lessonresearch.net).

The Lesson Study Process.

Lesson Study is usually a school-wide initiative where broad goals are established school-wide and in smaller groups. About 4-5 teachers at the same grade level work on research lessons at their level. While the Lesson Study process can take on many variations, Table 1 (facing page) describes the process that serves as the foundation (Fernandez & Chokshi, 2002; Lewis, 2000; Stepanek, 2001; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Watanabe, 2002).

Technology and Lesson Study

In analyzing sites that currently use Lesson Study, the response to the initiative has been overwhelmingly positive (Byrum, Jarrell, & Munoz, 2002; Lesson Study Group at Mills College, 2003; Lesson Study Research Group, 2003). However, some of the same concerns that typically arise regarding intensive professional development are the time and resources, both human and financial, needed to support the process. Technology has offered some unique ways to help solve these problems. The increasing number of Internet accessible digital compilations of lesson videos with teacher commentary help to address two challenges faced by teachers as they attempt to weave their personal craft knowledge of teaching into a professional knowledge base. First, these digital libraries help teachers envision alternatives to current practice. Secondly, they provide a means of communicating, or making public, what teachers have learned by trying out a specific lesson or approach and help to coordinate multiple trials of similar lessons across different sites thus providing the replication necessary to build a credible base of knowledge. Lesson Study scholars believe that the live demonstration of research lessons cannot be replaced by video lessons. But the digital archives of lessons serve an important role in building a structure and process for verifying the quality and accuracy of knowledge as well as providing examples on which to build new research

Table 1.

1. Focusing the Lesson	The usual beginning focus is on a broader school goal such as “increasing desire to learn” or “integrating knowledge”. All teachers help determine this broad goal and then the smaller teams of grade level teachers identify the specific topic of the research lesson, usually a concept that has historically been problematic in their own classrooms.
2. Planning the Lesson	Research is conducted by teachers, reading books and articles about the topic and viewing existing electronic records of the lessons in the content area. Teachers collaboratively develop the plan and a draft is presented to the school staff for feedback.
3. Teaching the Lesson	One teacher from the team teaches the lesson in their classroom. Other team members observe the live lesson very closely and take notes on student and teacher actions and responses. The lesson is typically documented through video, photos, audiotapes, and student artifacts.
4. Reflecting and Evaluating	Following the lesson, the group meets to discuss the lesson. The teacher who taught the lesson presents first, outlining how they think the lesson went and what problems arose. The observing teachers share their own observations and suggestions.
5. Revising the Lesson	Changes are made to the original lesson, usually based on student misunderstandings that teachers noticed in their observations. Following this revision, the lesson may be retaught to a different group of students. The same person may reteach the lesson or a different teacher may teach. All the teachers in the school are often invited to observe the revised lesson.
6. Reflecting and Evaluating	The entire staff participates in the second debriefing session that often focuses on larger, more general issues of teaching and learning. If an outside expert is working with the group (often from another school or university), they often speak during this last debriefing.
7. Sharing Results	From these research lessons, teachers create a bank of well-crafted lessons to draw upon. These are not “perfect” lessons but rather examples of teacher practice that have been researched and revised by a collective group and are examples of pedagogy in action. Teachers will often publish a report about their study, complete with teacher reflections and a summary of group discussion. In addition, electronic versions of the lesson are part of an ongoing archive. Finally, educators from outside the school and community members may be invited to observe the lessons at Lesson Study Open Houses.

lessons. Several technology resources have emerged to help this process and these include LessonLab Inc, (www.lessonlab.com), Global Education Resources LLC (www.globaledresources.com), and Case Technologies to Enhance Literacy Learning (CTELL) (<http://ctell.uconn.edu>).

Another positive use of technology is emerging during the Lesson Study process at some sites (Byrum et al., 2002). It is being integrated into research lessons and included as a key feature to consider when planning these lessons. For example, when planning a language arts activity, examining and investigating the use of and access to Internet resources could be an important consideration. The demonstration of the integrated technology in the research lesson, usually by teachers who volunteer because of their relative expertise with technology, helps observers to see this technology integration and how to use it effectively in the context of teaching and learning. The research lessons serve the function as intended by the Lesson Study initiative but also go further to demonstrate technology use for teachers who may be reluctant to pursue this integration on their own. Finally, e-mail communication and listservs help teachers communicate across time and distance and help fill in the gaps between planning sessions when educators want to discuss and collaborate with others.

Advantages and challenges of Lesson Study

Lesson Study is relatively new to the United States and is sprouting up in pockets around the country. Like any professional development initiative, both advantages and challenges abound. The good news is that settings where teachers generate knowledge about practice are not unfamiliar to educators in the U.S., as seen in study groups and book clubs and programs like EIR, the Literacy Collaborative, Reading Recovery, and ELLM, and the conditions for supporting these types of initiatives have been evolving where teachers are seen as collaborative researchers. Another advantage to Lesson Study is that individual teachers can begin to see one's teaching through the eyes of colleagues and students. One Japanese teacher describes a typical lesson as "a swiftly flowing river" (Lewis & Tsuchida, 1998,

p. 15) and says that when teachers are teaching, they make judgments instantly; the real profile of the teacher is revealed when the teaching is observed by colleagues. Teachers also report that, in addition to helping with big issues of content and pedagogy, the research lessons also help point out the little things teachers do, whether it's precise language used or a technique to explain a difficult concept, that result from unique student responses. And, not surprising, teachers report being nervous when conducting research lessons that are observed by others. However, these professionals go on to reflect that the process also brings incredible growth, colleague support and appreciation, and the increased ability to help students learn. In addition, the process of ongoing demonstration and reflection gradually becomes a natural and expected event in our professional teaching lives.

Some barriers that exist are the common ones: time, money, and human resources. Schools and districts committed to this process have used a variety of innovative ways to make Lesson Study a reality (see Lewis, 2002b, p 41-49). In addition, the education system has historically been extremely resistant to change and the wider community, including legislators, politicians and policymakers, has adopted a quick fix mentality for school reform. Lesson Study is no quick fix and should not be entered into lightly. It is a systemic philosophy that must be investigated and studied before initiation and requires long-term diligence and commitment.

Lesson Study in the United States

An implication for Lesson Study in the United States is how it translates from the Japanese system. Japan has used this process primarily for math and science education and with a relatively homogenous population. Educators in the United States are investigating the use of Lesson Study in a broader context including literacy and recognize that it needs to be replicated in all the diverse areas of our country to be a valid and universal initiative. Finally, as Hiebert et al. (2002) note, the question still remains: Is it possible to create one educational community, working toward the goal of building a professional knowledge base for teach-

ing using an infrastructure that enables this work and using methods that generate useful and trustworthy knowledge for teachers? This would require that the two communities of concerned educators, the researchers and the practitioners, be navigating on "the swiftly flowing river" in the same direction.

Concluding thoughts

The benefits of Lesson Study are worth the resources and effort required to sustain it. Lesson Study holds intrinsic value for teachers, breaking down the isolation so often experienced in teaching. It has the potential to bring educational visions to life. As Catherine Lewis summarizes, "The most notable, magnificent educational visions are just spots of ink on paper until a teacher somewhere brings them to life in a classroom" (2002b, p. 22). Further, Lesson Study values collaboration, improves teacher quality, and focuses on increasing student outcomes (Wilms, 2003). While it shares some similar characteristics with professional development activities such as cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994), study groups (Taylor, 2004), and demonstration sites (GA State Dept. of Education, 2002), it uniquely combines important aspects of all of these into a peer-initiated, planned, and implemented form of study. Early in the last century, noted educational theorist John Dewey wrote:

The successes of [excellent teachers] tend to be born and die with them: beneficial consequences extend only to those pupils who have personal contact with the gifted teachers. No one can measure the waste and loss that have come from the fact that the contributions of such men and women in the past have been thus confined (1929, p.10).

These words suggest that the greatest benefit of Lesson Study may be that it brings teaching alive, makes it public, and archives it so that it is available to inform teaching and learning over time.

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Author's name, mailing address, telephone number, FAX number, e-mail address, and professional affiliation should be on a separate cover page. The author's name should **not** appear on the manuscript.

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