JAPANESE METHOD GETS A WYOMING ACCENT

BY ALLEN TRENT, TIMOTHY BLUM, MERRIDITH MCLAUGHLIN, AND DOROTHY JEAN YOCOM

Lab school in Laramie adapts lesson study concept to its own needs

Since James Stigler and James Hiebert's book *The Teaching Gap* (Free Press, 1999) popularized the Japanese professional learning approach described as lesson study, many have touted it as a means for improving teaching in the U.S. (Fernandez & Chokshi, 2002; Watanabe, 2002; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Lesson study has been the subject of numerous articles (Fernandez & Chokshi, 2002; Lewis, 2002; Watanabe, 2002), and many urge teachers to adopt lesson study as a professional development approach.

Lesson study involves school-based groups of teachers in a process in which they:

- Identify an overarching goal;
- Formulate a research lesson that will help to achieve this goal;
- Collaboratively construct a very detailed lesson plan;
- Select a teacher to teach the lesson while other teachers observe;
- Discuss the lesson with the whole group and plan again;

The Wyoming view

- Lesson study or a similar collaborative process should be introduced to preservice teachers during their teacher education programs.
- Teachers should be given more autonomy over their professional development activities.
- Teachers need released time during the contractual day for professional development.
Lesson study includes many positive features. Systematic, teacher-directed approaches to professional development give teachers a mechanism through which to pilot and examine a variety of policy-driven initiatives such as implementing new curricula or exploring alternative assessments. In this respect, lesson study parallels action research. As action researchers, teachers study their classrooms to support ongoing improvement and generate craft knowledge in the process.

Yet the lesson study process and its potential for transferability to the United States should be closely examined. U.S. educators have had a tendency to unsuccessfully adopt trends, quick fixes, and easy solutions to remedy complex problems. Educators must become more critical, less reactive, and yet open to new methodologies and approaches.

LESSON STUDY GROUP FORMS

Since 1999, University of Wyoming faculty had worked with the Laramie public schools in a lab school, a K-9 school where university staff train student teachers and conduct research. Several university faculty members and lab school teachers met in a regular study group, and when that group read articles about the lesson study process, members were intrigued. The group’s meetings began to focus on reviewing, critiquing, and eventually implementing the lesson study process.

The group decided to use lesson study to address multiple requirements (the No Child Left Behind Act; national, state, and district standards; and standards of the teacher education program) in the lab school and in university classrooms. Members wanted to improve their own learning along with student achievement. The focus on student achievement centered on an identified need — helping special education students within the regular classroom. Middle school teachers were disappointed with results from the strategies they’d been using. The group began with an overarching lesson study goal: “To provide all children equal access to a high-quality education in a caring environment that nurtures personal growth.”

Study group members selected a curriculum unit and began planning. Members decided to emphasize a curriculum unit rather than an individual lesson, and to shift the emphasis away from content and whole group lessons to be able to differentiate and to examine individual students’ evidence of learning.

The group decided to include students from other classrooms (selected for participation by their teachers), a special education teacher, and parents (when interested and available) along with study group members as observers. These observers, like observers of the Japanese lessons, have specific observational tasks, but in the adapted version of the method, these tasks often direct attention to students and away from the teacher. The Japanese lessons place the teacher at the center of the activity (lecturing, demonstrating on the chalkboard, questioning). The adapted version positions the teacher as facilitator (moving among students as they engage problems or tasks, asking individual questions to extend students’ understanding, participating alongside students, and intervening as needed). Study group members also rotate responsibility for facilitating to allow preservice teachers opportunities to teach or facilitate in addition to observing and helping plan.

Feedback sessions (usually after school on the day lessons are taught) include group members sharing their observations, the facilitator discussing his or her thoughts on the lesson implementation and student participation, and group planning for future teaching.

These decisions were made after examining what the group considered positive aspects of the Japanese process, and also what it considered shortcomings to address given the school’s contexts and aims.

POSITIVE ASPECTS

The lesson study group listed a number of components of the process members considered most helpful:

Collaboration. The process is collaborative. Lesson study is done in groups of educators and underlying

ALLEN TRENT is an assistant professor of educational studies at the University of Wyoming. You can contact him at the College of Education, Department of Educational Studies, Dept. 3374, 1000 E. University Ave., Laramie, WY 82071-3374, (307) 766-2367, fax (307) 766-2018, e-mail: atrent@uwyo.edu.

TIMOTHY BLUM is a middle school teacher at the University of Wyoming Lab School. You can contact him at: University of Wyoming Lab School, College of Education, Dept. 3374, 1000 E. University Ave., Laramie, WY 82071-3374, (307) 766-2155, fax (307) 766-6668, e-mail: tblum@uwyo.edu.

MERIDITH MCLAUGHLIN is a middle school teacher at the University of Wyoming Lab School. You can contact her at the University of Wyoming Lab School, College of Education, Dept. 3374, 1000 E. University Ave., Laramie, WY 82071-3374, (307) 766-2155, fax (307) 766-6668, e-mail: m3@uwyo.edu.

DOROTHY JEAN YOCOM is an associate professor of special education at the University of Wyoming. You can contact her at the College of Education, Department of Special Education, Dept. 3374, 1000 E. University Ave., Laramie, WY 82071-3374, (307) 766-4033, fax (307) 766-2018, e-mail: djyocom@uwyo.edu.
the process is “a belief that collective effort can improve teaching” (Lewis, 2002, p. 64). The process incorporates peer coaching and requires teachers to visit and observe in other teachers’ classrooms. This collaboration begins to make permeable the traditionally isolating boundaries that keep individual teachers in their own classrooms. Teachers who have engaged in lesson study “believe they need to forge a common vision of good practice” (Lewis, 2002, p. 64).

**Ongoing.** Lesson study is a process of sustained professional development. The lesson study process may span a period of three or four years (Fernandez & Chokshi, 2002), allowing teachers time for deep learning and reflection. Meaningful professional development must be sustained, ongoing, and coherent. Short-term, decontextualized professional development does not create the kind of long-term change in teacher practice that can effect meaningful improvements in student achievement.

The most powerful forms of staff development occur in ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis, preferably several times a week, for the purposes of learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving. These teams, often called learning communities or communities of practice, operate with a commitment to the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation and engage their members in improving their daily work to advance the achievement of school district and school goals for student learning (National Staff Development Council, 2001).

**Teachers’ role.** “Research lessons honor the central role of teachers” (Lewis, 2002, p. 64). Teachers too often have been subjected to prescriptive, top-down professional development and “inservicing.” Lesson study places the responsibility for professional development content in the hands of those who best know what is needed: teachers.

**Depth.** Lastly, lesson study emphasizes depth over breadth. Research in U.S. education notes our propensity for coverage is not compatible with how people learn (National Research Council, 1999). This growing literature base urges: “Superficial coverage of all topics in a subject area must be replaced with in-depth coverage of fewer topics that allows key concepts in that discipline to be understood” (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999, p. 16). The current educational climate, however, seems in stark contrast with this principle.

**CONCERNS AND CRITIQUE**

Adapting this method required addressing the issues of procedure, transferability, curriculum, and individual student needs.

**Procedure.** Those who have written recently about lesson study and its compatibility with U.S. educational needs and settings typically outline prescriptive, linear methods for implementation (Watanabe, 2002; Fernandez & Chokshi, 2002, p. 129). Watanabe (2002, p. 38), for example, says, “Observing teachers must be careful not to teach the students, even when the students are struggling.”

The lesson study group decided to take advantage of all potential resources. While teachers would not “give out the right answers,” members agreed that all adults present should support students’ learning by assisting students who requested help, asking probing questions, and interacting with students as appropriate. Students and teachers in the Laramie lesson study lessons interact with students.

**Transferability.** Group members challenged the assumption that the process as it works in Japan is transferable to U.S. settings. U.S. teachers cite time constraints as a major impediment to high-quality professional development (Moss, Noden, & Vacca, 1994). Japanese educators value lesson study on a national level and are given time during the contractual day to engage in this time-consuming process. “The Japanese have created a national research-and-development system, based on teach-
Japan has a national curriculum and so teachers are better able to focus on a lesson. What is learned from the lesson study is published as a reflective report and provides teachers with a national bank of research lessons that address the national curriculum. The United States doesn’t have a national curriculum, and finely honed lessons that address curricular specifics are less useful to U.S. teachers.

Instead, group members concluded that U.S. teachers should emphasize students’ understanding. In addition, the Japanese curriculum is relatively static and changes only every 20 years or so (Lewis, 2002, p. 65). In the U.S., curricular revisions have occurred so often that group members concluded focusing energy on a single lesson would be spending limited time on content that might soon change.

**Individualized student needs.** The group also noted that children, classes, and circumstances all are unique. The study group believed that the lesson study process did not emphasize enough students’ experiences and perspectives, and that teachers missed out on valuable student input as a result.

Lesson study focuses on teacher-centered lessons for the whole group. As group members explored the challenges of differentiating instruction for individual students, they were concerned that the lesson study emphasis missed the mark. What about individual differences and the needs of individual students? What do the kids want to know? And, how can teachers incorporate this into the curricular frameworks? Literature on lesson study did not seem to address these questions.

**AN ADAPTED PROCESS**

After using the process in two middle school classes, the group broadened its efforts to include lesson study around topics, strategies, and teaching in the university’s teacher education classes, again including a broad group of stakeholders in planning, observation, and debriefing and feedback stages. Participants include interested teacher educators, preservice teacher volunteers, the middle school teachers, and the university special educator.

The study group helped incorporate special education-related topics into the teacher education sessions. For example, questions guiding a teacher education lesson study include: How should preservice teachers plan to meet the learning needs of all children, including special education students? What does 100% proficiency for all children mean, and how might we achieve this goal? What are appropriate ways to integrate special education content in a teacher education program? How might professional development study groups collaboratively address these challenges?

The work has been energizing — and overwhelming. The lesson study group continues to meet approximately twice a month and continues lesson studies in different subject areas, with different age groups, and with an increasingly diverse group.

**REFERENCES**


