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A Hong Kong case of lesson study—Benefits and concerns

Jackie F.K. Lee*

Department of English, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, Hong Kong

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a feeling that effective teachers can be fostered by grounding professional development in actual classroom practice. This paper reports how a group of teachers adopted a lesson study approach and worked collaboratively so as to improve their class instruction on *wh*-question formation. Teachers' reflections indicate that the collaborative environment throughout the study enabled them to gain insights into how to improve their teaching strategies. Also identified are some of the problems faced by teachers, which may undermine the gains of lesson study.

Keywords: Teacher development; Lesson study; *wh*-questions; Hong Kong

1. Introduction

With the introduction of the *Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* in 2000, a number of education reforms are being implemented. The aim is to build an education system that is conducive to life-long learning and all-round development. As the key players in implementing the Education Reform, teachers are expected to adapt to new roles: from being merely transmitters of knowledge to sources of inspiration for students in their construction of knowledge, and from implementers of curricula to participants in the development of school-based curricula (Education Commission, 2000). To support these reforms, the Hong Kong SAR Government is striving to enhance the quality and professionalism of the teaching force by providing training and support. However, there are dangers in the top-down approach that is adopted in the traditional training courses. Typically, experts are invited to deliver talks or workshops, with teachers being merely passive recipients of the new ideas, pedagogies and reforms propounded by the experts. Predictably, there will be some committed teachers who, in isolation, will try to apply the concepts to their classes, with or without success; others will simply ignore the new ideas and continue using the teaching approaches with which they are familiar.

2. What is lesson study?

In recent years, there has been a feeling that effective teachers can be fostered by grounding professional development in actual classroom practice. Influenced by Stigler and Hiebert (1999), a number of Japanese, American and Hong Kong educators (e.g. Chokshi & Fernandez, 2005; Fernandez, Cannon, & Chokshi, 2003; Fernandez & Chokshi, 2002; Lewis, Perry, Hurd, & O'Connell,

*Tel.: +852 2948 8402; fax: +852 2948 7270.
E-mail address: jfkee@ied.edu.hk

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2006; Lewis & Tsuchida, 1998; Lo, Chik, & Pang, 2006; Lo et al., 2002; Pang & Marton, 2003; Stewart & Brendefur, 2005; Watanabe, 2002) have shifted to lesson study as a form of professional development. Lewis (2000, pp. 3–4) explains research lessons and lesson study:

> *Kenkyuu jugyou* means research lesson (or study lesson), and refers to the lessons that teachers jointly plan, observe and discuss. *Jugyou kenkyuu*—using the same two words in the reverse order—means lesson research (or lesson study), and refers to the process of instructional improvement of which the research lesson is the core piece.

Lewis (2000) states that research lessons are actual classroom lessons with students, and they typically share five characteristics:

(1) Research lessons are observed by other teachers.
(2) Research lessons are planned for a long time, usually collaboratively.
(3) Research lessons are designed to bring to life in a lesson a particular goal or vision of education.
(4) Research lessons are recorded.
(5) Research lessons are discussed.

A number of concepts are pertinent to understanding lesson study. According to Lo and Pong (2005, p. 14), the concept of the "object of learning" refers to the end towards which the learning activity is directed and how it is made sense of by the learner. How one understands and learns a phenomenon depends on what critical aspects one pays attention to. An important role of teachers, therefore, is to identify what is critical in order for students to acquire the object of learning. If teachers are unable to highlight these critical aspects in their teaching, a learning gap will be left unattended. For example, in the learning of subject–verb agreement, some students may have problems with sentences such as *The cook cooks the meal* and *The cooks cook the meal* because of the different word classes that the word *cook* can fall into—as a noun, *cook* + the morpheme *s* is a plural form, thus requiring a general present tense verb to follow; as a verb, *cook* + the morpheme *s* is a singular form, thus requiring a singular noun to precede it. These are the critical aspects that many students find difficult in the process of learning. Teachers who are not aware of these features and the multi-class property of the word *cook*, and do not help students discern them will encounter frustrated students.

Marton and Booth (1997) argue that a key feature in learning involves discerning a phenomenon in a new light—there is no learning without discerning, and no discernment without variation. Lo et al. (2002) build on the theory and include three types of variation:

- *V1—Variation in students' understanding of what is taught*: Students possess different previous knowledge, preconceptions or intuitive understanding of the things to be taught, which are often stubborn and resilient to change (see Chinn & Brewer, 1993; Confrey, 1990). Knowledge of these preconceptions, which can be found through pre-tests, student interviews before the lesson and/or listening to students' views during the lesson, is invaluable for teachers to design effective teaching.
- *V2—Variation in teachers' ways of dealing with object of learning*: Through daily contact with students, teachers construct knowledge about the different ways that students learn particular concepts and build up different methods to cater for student differences. The variation in teachers' ways of dealing with particular topics can be shared through preparatory meetings before research lessons, peer observation of research lessons and post-lesson conferences.
- *V3—Using variation as a guiding principle of pedagogical design*: It is argued that teachers should make conscious efforts to vary certain critical aspects while keeping other aspects of the object of learning constant so as to make learning more effective. Marton and Runesson (2003; cited in Lo & Pong, 2005) identify four patterns of variation commonly found in lessons: contrast, separation, generalization and fusion. For example, to understand the concept "oval", the pattern of variation is produced by varying values of the same dimension (shape)—*contrasting* "oval" with other shapes. Shapes like round, square and rectangular are identified as values on this dimension of variation, and the concept "oval" is therefore *separated* and discerned. To fully understand the concept "oval", a child also needs to experience its various appearances, as in oval pendants, oval faces, oval mirrors, etc. to *generalize* the concept "oval" and distinguish the dimension of shapes from other aspects (e.g. jewelry, appearance, furniture). Nevertheless, the