



# A researcher-facilitator's reflection: Implementing a Singapore case of learning study



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The choice and role of theoretical framework needs to be carefully considered.
- Degrees of openness to differences in patterns of variation warrant attention.
- Greater deliberation on the role of the researcher-facilitator advocated.
- Teachers' perceptions of practicality and daily routines need greater attention.
- Teachers' unreflective use of theory and researcher lacking reflexivity as concerns.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports a researcher-facilitator's reflection of implementing a professional development approach, and serves to address the inadequate attention given to the influence of researcher-facilitators in professional development efforts. The researcher-facilitator's experiences were compared to four Grade 9–10 Singapore Science teachers participating in a *variation theory*-framed learning study that promoted teacher research and collaboration. Extending current understandings of implementation and sustainability challenges, an analysis employing *conceptual change* framework surfaced three issues, namely, the choice and role of theoretical framework, degrees of openness to differences in patterns of variation, and role of a researcher-facilitator. Insights emerging from the reflection are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the decades, endeavors to promote teacher learning and development have had the shared goal of moving away from one-off professional development (PD) formats that were often proven to be ineffective (Elmore, 2002). In its place, we have witnessed a surge of studies promoting teaching and learning that is more contextually situated (e.g., Anderson, Greeno, Reder, & Simon, 2000; Borko & Putnam, 1996; Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991), promoting teacher collaboration (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008), and teachers as researchers (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Elliott, 1991; Zeichner & Noffke,

2001). These studies send strong signals of the need to reconceptualize teacher development, even as the “multicausal, multi-dimensional, and multicorrelational quality of teacher learning” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 394) is starting to gain greater attention.

With the rhetoric of the importance of teacher PD because teachers are deemed as change agents (Barab & Luehmann, 2003; Davis, 2003; Peers, Diezmann, & Watters, 2003), educational reforms have introduced elements of these new conceptualizations in tandem with policymakers' emphasis on improving the quality of teachers. For example, several schools in Singapore and other parts of Asia have recently embarked on various PD programs to promote teacher research and collaboration that are situated within the teachers' school settings, such as professional learning communities and lesson studies (e.g., Cheng & Lee, 2011/2012; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Lee, 2008; Lim, Lee, Saito, & Syed Haron, 2011; White & Lim, 2008). Similarly, we have seen a phenomenal widespread of the employment of lesson studies to promote

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teacher PD around the world (Fernández, 2010; Fernandez, Cannon, & Chokshi, 2003; Hollingsworth & Oliver, 2005; Lewis, Perry, & Hurd, 2009; Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006; Puchner & Taylor, 2006).

These reforms, like all educational reforms, are fraught with tensions and challenges (Chokshi & Fernandez, 2004; Davis, 2003; Fernandez & Chokshi, 2004; Lee, 2008; Parks, 2008; Wee, Shepardson, Fast, & Harbor, 2007; White & Lim, 2008). The problem may be exacerbated by how top-down approaches, while claiming to adopt new conceptualizations of teacher development, may revert to old forms that are disrespectful of teachers' knowledge and highly unconnected to teachers' daily routines and professional lives (Miller, 1995; Zeichner, 2003). My study seeks to foreground another potential concern of educational reforms and teacher PD (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Guskey, 2000; Loucks-Horsley, Stiles, Mundry, Love, & Hewson, 2010): the influence and roles of the researcher-facilitator risk being relegated to the background when (1) they run up against teacher and student learning, the latter dominating the attention of policymakers, teachers and researchers; and (2) when they compete with previously surfaced challenges for attention.

Phrased differently, while several PD efforts have commonly focused on developing a descriptive knowledge base and surfacing implementation concerns and issues (e.g., Chokshi & Fernandez, 2004; Lee, 2008; Lewis et al., 2006, 2009; Saito, Hawe, Hadiprawiroc, & Sukirman, 2008), systematic studies by researcher-facilitators examining their own roles and positions are by far fewer (e.g., Dias, Eick, & Brantley-Dias, 2011; Rogers, Convery, Simmons, & Weatherall, 2012; Walker, 2007; Zack, 2006). Even amongst researchers that engage in self-study, it appears that there are more self-studies conducted within pre-service teacher education (e.g., Brandenburg, 2004; Clarke, Erickson, Collins, & Phelan, 2005; Freese, 1999; Hamilton, Pinnegar, Russell, Loughran, & LaBoskey, 1998; Kosnick & Beck, 2006; Nicol, 2006) than in in-service teacher PD programs (e.g., Walker, 2007). Furthermore, there seems to be inadequate attention paid to the quality of researcher-facilitators by policymakers who front the agenda of promoting teacher PD. Consequently, the roles and influence of the researcher-facilitator in PD and reform efforts recede to becoming a "black box" that is often taken-for-granted.

In hope to unravel this "black box", I have immersed myself in reflection as a way to explore the challenges of designing and implementing a PD approach, the learning study (elaborated later on). My reflection is timely in view of a growing interest in learning study as a teacher PD approach around the world (e.g., Holmqvist, 2011; Lo, 2009; Pang & Lo, 2012; Pang & Marton, 2003; 2005; Runesson, Kullberg, & Maunula, 2011). With the maturation of this relatively new approach, and in view of how learning studies are also burdened with tensions and challenges (Elliott, 2012; Lo, 2009; Walker, 2007), attention directed to issues of implementation and sustainability is necessitated.

Furthermore, because of the dissonances I constantly felt as a researcher-facilitator (noted in my journal entries), I was motivated to search for a way to introspectively make sense of my own experiences and to retrospectively make sense of the participating teachers'. I have employed conceptual change (Hewson & Hewson, 1984) as a framework to help surface and examine alternative perspectives (Loughran, 2007) offered by the teachers. This constituted a way for me to reflect on (Rogers et al., 2012) and to reframe my understandings (Loughran, 2007) by moving them closer to the contexts of teachers' classrooms; as an opportunity for my own professional learning. Concomitantly, it exposes how my "self" as a researcher-facilitator has taken its reference from the participants who have, in some sense, co-constructed my role and identity; to a certain degree, it resembles how Richards (1998) drew on her pre-service teachers' journal entries to construct a

self-portrait. My reflections are thus not solely about myself, nor the teachers' understandings. Rather, it mirrors an attempt to negotiate my identity by allowing teachers' lived experiences to run up against mine; an attempt to contribute to teacher learning literature by exploring a way for a simultaneous and careful examination of the lived experiences of different key actors in teacher PD.

Ultimately, I hope that my reflection serves as a cautionary tale against implementing PD programs without sufficient thought, and against regarding them as a panacea for many of the problems encountered in schools today. Concomitantly, in surfacing issues worthy of further attention, the reflection serves as a timely reminder that educational reform initiatives need to pay greater attention to researcher-facilitators as agents involved in the process of bridging policies and the teachers who will translate those policies into lived curricula. It also urges teacher developers and researchers to carefully consider their roles.

### 1.1. Introduction to learning study

Learning study is a PD approach that aims to promote opportunities for teachers to pool their resources and knowledge to collaboratively tackle pedagogical and curricular challenges, and for teachers to engage in practitioner inquiry by trying out new pedagogical arrangements in their classrooms (see Pang & Marton, 2003, 2005 for details). In supporting the perspective that teacher learning is contextually situated (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wilson & Berne, 1999), the concept of a learning study draws from lesson study's systematic and collaborative efforts to conduct in-depth studies of particular lessons and to improve teaching and learning (Cheng & Lee, 2011/2012; Fernandez et al., 2003; Hunter & Back, 2011; Lee, 2008; Lewis et al., 2009; Lieberman, 2009; Perry & Lewis, 2009; Podhorsky & Fisher, 2007; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; White & Lim, 2008). It is also inspired by design experiments (Brown, 1992; Collins, 1992, 1999) that aim to "engineer innovative educational environments and simultaneously conduct experimental studies of those innovations" (Brown, 1992, p. 141). In incorporating elements of both lesson study and design experiments, learning study's strong theoretical underpinning (Holmqvist, 2011; Pang & Lo, 2012) and its "sharp focus" on the learning object – an intended capability students are to develop during the research lessons, as opposed to mastery of mere curricular content (Pang & Lo, 2012, p. 92) – constitute the distinguishing features of the approach. The strong theoretical frame differentiates learning study from lesson study.

Variation theory is the key theory employed to frame and promote student learning in learning studies, such as in English language, Economics, Mathematics and Science (Holmqvist, 2011; Holmqvist, Gustavsson, & Wernberg, 2007; Lo, Chik, & Pang, 2006; Pang & Lo, 2012; Pang & Marton, 2003; 2005; Runesson et al., 2011). An outgrowth of phenomenographic perspectives as accorded by Marton and Booth (1997), variation theory provides a view of learning: learning is viewed as the development of a capability to experience something in more advanced or complex ways than before. Differentiating from what is invariant, the learner becomes aware of that which is varying. In becoming increasingly aware of more aspects of a learning object, the student may be deemed to have developed more complex understandings and experiences and thus has learnt.

While extant studies have encouraged teachers to employ perspectives offered by variation theory to frame student learning, the theory has more commonly been applied as a pedagogical tool (Marton & Tsui, 2004; Pang & Lo, 2012) that guided teachers' design, teaching and evaluation of research lessons. Premised on how aspects that were varied (while others were kept invariant)

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