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Review of Leading Lesson Study: A Practical Guide for Teachers and Facilitators

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A Review of *Leading Lesson Study: A Practical Guide for Teachers and Facilitators* by Jennifer Stepanek, Gary Appel, Melinda Leong, Michelle Turner Mangan, and Mark Mitchell

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Put very simply, “[l]esson study is a professional development practice in which teachers collaborate to develop a lesson plan, teach, and observe the lesson to collect data on student learning, and [in which they] use their observations to refine their lesson” (p. 2). The approach was first developed in Japan and this book is just what the title purports it to be—a guide for teachers and facilitators who would like to bring this style of continuous professional development to their own classrooms.

Overview of the Text

The book’s introduction contains an overview of Lesson Study presenting the main elements of the process and describing its history. The next chapter, “Laying the Groundwork for Lesson Study,” addresses teachers’ concerns, such as creating an action plan, finding the time, obtaining compensation for additional work time, and gaining support from administrators. The chapters that follow explain the processes of assembling appropriate collaborative groups, planning the lessons that will be analyzed, teaching the lessons to be analyzed, observing lessons, and debriefing. The text then addresses revising, reteaching and reflecting on the process as well as how to share the results with collaborators. In the final chapter, the authors return to the issues raised in the first chapter by addressing the long-term implementation of Lesson Study, teacher turnover, and the challenge of

embedding lesson study into everyday teaching practices.

Throughout the book, diagrams and forms are used to illustrate the processes; a reference table of diagrams follows the table of contents. These diagrams serve as visual aids providing the templates for documents that can be created to support Lesson Study programs. Unfortunately, black-line masters that could be photocopied are not provided.

The book includes three Appendices. The first contains three sample lesson plans appropriate for Lesson Study—two fourth grade science lessons and a third grade language arts lesson. All three might serve as templates for Lesson Study. The second Appendix offers a list of frequently asked questions related to implementation. Responses to these questions offer multiple perspectives on managing Lesson Study. Finally, a list of additional resources concludes the volume.

Who the Book is For...

This book is for current in-service teachers who want to be involved with Lesson Study. All teachers wishing to improve by reflecting upon their teaching and improving their professional practice will benefit from this book. This book is not a collection of lessons plans; but rather, it is a guide towards becoming more reflective in one's own practice.

“[L]esson study helps teachers gain a better understanding of how their decisions and

actions contribute to student learning ... by generating professional knowledge, *not* by developing a bank of exemplary lessons” (pp. 12-13). Due to the amount of time required to implement lesson study, which includes having sufficient teaching experience to draw upon and the ability to analyze another's teaching, Lesson Study may be more appropriate for teachers with several years of experience as opposed to a first year teacher.

Although the guide is primarily written for workshop facilitators who have some previous experience with the method, the authors also include modifications for teachers without previous exposure to Lesson Study. The information meant for group leaders would be useful to other group members as well as useful individual teachers to help them understand the entire process.

Although terminology used may not be common knowledge to people outside of education, the average classroom teacher would be familiar with the terms used. Short sections, many subheadings, and a well-organized table of contents and index make the book a useful reference even for teachers. The size of the book makes it convenient for both photocopying and for writing in the margins.

Throughout the book special sections titled “From the Field” provide first-hand anecdotes that illustrate strategies described in the book. These sections provide helpful advice and tips to teachers who are just getting started. Unfortunately the authors are sometimes overly-focused on details or boast about the effectiveness of Lesson Study without providing solid evidence.,

Advancing Teacher Research

Good teachers are taught to reflect on their own practice, but rarely have they been instructed on *how* to reflect. Lesson Study provides a framework for current teachers to improve their skills as they work cooperatively. In addition to satisfying professional development goals, these projects can also lead to Action Research which can help teachers identify ways to contribute to realms of knowledge beyond their schools.

Teacher-led action research is an important part of professional development and of advancing the field of education by allowing teachers to continuously revise and improve their teaching. This impacts not just classrooms, but also the future of the teaching profession. For example, studying subtle changes in lesson planning strategies, such as assigning individual students roles and responsibilities during group work, can help teachers to make their classrooms more exciting and interesting. When aggregated across classrooms, instructional changes can have profound effects. Lesson Study provides a framework and a systematic approach to conducting this type of front-line research.

Although there are many books written about Action Research, the authors of this volume contribute more than procedural issues related to teaching and revising lessons. They also address practical matters related to creating reflective teaching environments geared towards continual professional development. Benefits include: the purposeful recruitment of teachers whose particular skills contribute to the group; creating a framework for peer observation; and using research themes to guide what questions are asked that will, at the same time, contribute to more desirable outcomes.

Why Teachers Need This Book

Teachers are often required to show evidence of professional development and continuous improvement. The Lesson Study approach can support teachers who are working on Professional Development Plans—especially groups of teachers who are working together. Through collaboration, teachers can learn from each other, observe various teaching strategies, and document their research and work.

While this book may falter somewhat in its over-reliance on prescribed lessons and units, this is not a shortcoming of the Lesson Study method itself. Experienced classroom teachers who are already accustomed to adapting instruction will have little trouble adapting the

observation formats and criteria to fit their classrooms.

Making It Work

The Lesson Study method was originally developed in Japan, and the differences in education systems cannot be ignored. The authors maintain that despite the lack of a national curriculum in the United States and some clear differences in pedagogical discourses, the Lesson Study can still be useful to American teachers. As the authors' admit, "the challenge is to strike a balance between keeping the essential elements of lesson study intact ... while changing the model to fit the reality of schools in the United States" (p. 4). This presents a challenge for teachers who must not only adopt a method for revising their own teaching, but must also adapt the process to their particular situation and cultural context. The challenge means that teachers are not necessarily bound to a prescribed framework. Throughout the book the authors argue that teachers and facilitators of Lesson Study must adapt the model to fit their needs, their expectations, and the culture of their schools.

Conclusion

While there may be complexities that accompany transplanting Lesson Study from a Japanese setting to an American one, the authors do not advocate a strict adherence to the model presented. This book serves as a guide for teachers and facilitators who are interested in implementing local professional development efforts. To that end, the book accomplishes what the authors set out to do.

The process is clearly defined and ample resources are provided to assist teachers in establishing the program. While the program may not be perfectly appropriate for all teachers in all schools, the framework provides a foundation for groups of professionals to

build their own systems of reflection and continuous improvement.

Author Biographies

The authors bring various types of educational expertise - representing both classroom teachers and researchers who have worked with children at different levels and in different educational settings.

Stepanek and Leong are both affiliated with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) in Portland, OR. As a researcher with NWREL, Stepanek participated in projects related to science and math education as well as supporting the professional development of teachers for gifted students. She has also addressed standards-based instruction and classroom assessment. Leong is a Senior Program Advisor for NWREL and previously was a teacher and director in the New York City public school system.

Both Appel and Mitchell are senior associates at Learning Point Associates, one of the organizations responsible for publishing this text. Appel has over 30 years of experience in the K-12 system teaching mathematics. He now conducts professional development services on Lesson Study. Mitchell, after 20 years of developing curriculum and working to improve math and science instruction, conducts workshops and provides technical assistance to school systems at the district and state levels.

At the time the volume was published, Mangan was a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin—Madison and an employee of Learning Point Associates. Her research focused on the evaluative aspect of Lesson Study. In addition to lecturing on the practical application of Lesson Study, she has co-authored volumes on effective professional development for teachers.