



Lesson Study Comparison

Under the Common Core State Standards, new standards for K-12 English language arts/literacy (ELA) and mathematics were introduced. Implementation of these standards has been challenging and experts agree that developing students' abilities with respect to these standards requires a different approach to teaching than what has commonly been seen in U.S. classrooms (NCIM, 2014).

The adoption of lesson study by educators in the U.S. had seen mixed results, primarily because many of the practitioners were working on projects based on a description of the Japanese model (Jogyou kenkyuu) without anyone having observed the practice in Japan.

The Lesson Study Group at Mills College involved a randomized, controlled trial of lesson study, and found a significant impact on both teachers' and students' mathematical knowledge (Lewis & Perry, 2014). Further research demonstrated that many aspects of lesson study as practiced in Japan had been left out. For example, one program tried to fit an entire lesson study cycle into one day, while another left out the initial stage of building insight into student thinking.

The common finding was that teachers who had engaged in lesson study believed the purpose of the exercise was to build a perfect lesson plan, when in fact the true purpose is to gain new knowledge about teaching and learning. A conclusion of the most recent research is that effective lesson study must be collaborative, involving all or nearly all of a school's staff, and must be focused on addressing a common teaching and learning challenge as identified by the teachers (Takahashi & McDougal, 2014).

For lesson study to be effective, a transition from the traditional approach of seeking a better lesson plan while trying to meet restrictive time allotments to a more collaborative and open-ended process seeking new teaching and learning knowledge must be undertaken.

Here are the primary differences as observed between traditional attempts at lesson study and the collaborative approach:

Traditional	Collaborative Lesson Study
Begins with answers	Begins with questions
Driven by an expert	Driven by participants
Communication: trainer to/from teachers	Communication: among teachers
Relationships are hierarchical	Relationships are reciprocal
Research informs practice	Practice is research

(adapted from Mills College Lesson Study Group, n.d.)



Another factor common to the Japanese model but not routinely employed in the U.S. is the use of expert teachers or teacher mentors. While the traditional attempts have involved trainers facilitating the process (a “train the teachers” approach), the collaborative approach involves an expert teacher as someone outside the planning group who has deep expertise in the content. Their role is to draw attention to key issues during the planning phase and to provide feedback at the post-lesson study discussion.

Given these observed differences between traditional attempts at lesson study and the collaborative approach, experts have derived the following process:

1. In collaborative lesson study, teachers begin by carefully reading the course of study, reading relevant research articles and examining available curricula in a study of materials for teaching (Takahashi & Yoshida, 2004).
2. Based on the study of materials, teachers then design a lesson focused on a problematic topic while also addressing a broader research theme related to teaching and learning. In other words, a problem known to the teachers is identified and added into the process for study as part of teaching the lesson. This becomes the “research lesson”.
3. Once the research lesson is defined it is taught by a teacher from the planning team while the other team members, and other educators who are not on the planning team including the expert teacher, observe the teaching of the lesson.
4. Planning team members and invited others conduct a post-lesson discussion focused on how students responded to the lesson. The goal is to gain insights into the teaching and learning process (Lewis & Tsuchida, 1997). The purpose is to gain expertise and learn something new, not refine the lesson (although that may be a resultant benefit).

Significant time must be spent in preparation and in identifying a current problem to be included in the lesson design. The process takes several weeks and includes collaborative resources from outside the lesson study team, including the expert teacher and/or teacher mentor.

One of the biggest challenges to attempts at collaborative lesson study in U.S. school districts has been that the benefits of these efforts have often dissipated as teachers changed jobs, schools changed administrators, and a lack of adequate time and support drained the enthusiasm and commitment of those involved.

Assignment Questions

1. Clearly understanding that the goal of new knowledge is critical to effective lesson study, what type of teaching problem would you expect to look for and include in lesson design?
2. Given the need for resources and capacity building that collaborative lesson study requires, what contribution could you provide to make it a routine component of your school and teaching team’s professional development?