



# professional LEARNING

## Effective, school-based professional learning: An overview of lesson study

*Excerpted from **Leading Lesson Study: A Practical Guide for Teachers and Facilitators**, Corwin Press, 2007, co-authored by Gary Appel (MSDC board member), Melinda Leong, Michelle Mangin, Mark Mitchell and Jennifer Stepanek*



**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 use their observations to refine their lesson. It is a process that teachers engage in to learn more about effective practices that result in improved learning outcomes for students.

When teachers participate in lesson study, they have an opportunity to focus their attention on the deeper substance of their work. There is little time for such concentration when teachers are caught up in the flow of teaching.

The time devoted to investigating students as they think and learn is the part of lesson study that teachers find most appealing and exciting. Lesson study teams examine how students learn and what they bring to the learning experience. Their inquiries lead them to knowledge about what stimulates students' interest and inspires them to persist through a challenging task.

When they observe, the teachers are often assigned to follow one group of children throughout the lesson. They pay close attention to the conversations students have with each other as well as the teacher's interactions with the small groups. They are also intent on capturing students' reactions to the lesson: How eager are they to investigate the topic? Japanese teachers mention watching the students to see if their eyes are shining and listening for the exclamations that students make to themselves (Lewis, 2000).

Lesson study provides a context for examining content. Teachers deepen their own understanding, gaining a sense of how different topics fit together and build on each other. They take time to examine and reflect on

curricula and other teaching materials. They also work together on how to translate their own content knowledge into experiences for students.

The following is a brief overview of the lesson study process. It is intended to be an initial introduction to the work of lesson study teams.

**Setting Goals:** Teachers identify a research theme – a broad, long-term goal – to guide the lesson study cycle and focus their work (Lewis, 2000). It is usually focused on students – for example, “Students will become confident and creative thinkers and innovators.” Lesson study teams often focus on the same research theme through multiple cycles of lesson study over the course of several years (Yoshida, 1999). Ideally, the goal will serve as a focus for the whole professional development program, not just lesson study. The research theme helps to ensure that lesson study addresses issues that will have an impact on student learning.

**Planning the Lesson:** Using the research theme to guide their work, the lesson study team collaboratively develops a classroom lesson, which is called a research lesson. The lesson

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study team identifies specific lesson goals that often come from examining assessment data or identifying a common problem. The teachers spend time investigating teaching materials and draw on their own experiences, ideas they have read about, and strategies they have seen other teachers use (Lewis, 2000). The plan for the research lesson is very detailed, with descriptions of anticipated responses from students. It is a guide for teaching the lesson, but it also serves as a communication tool for the lesson study team by clarifying the goals and ideas being tested.



### Teaching, Observing, and Debriefing:

When the plan is complete, one person teaches the lesson to his or her students. The other team members serve as data collectors, and sometimes they are joined by invited guests, including "knowledgeable others" – educators with expertise in content or pedagogy relevant to the research lesson. The observers take notes on what the teacher and the students are doing and saying and collect evidence of student thinking. The purpose of the observation is to gather data about the effectiveness of the lesson, not to evaluate the teacher. After a break, teachers and guests conduct a debriefing to discuss the lesson and their observations. The members of the lesson study team – and other observers if they are present – share the evidence of student learning they have observed.

**Revising and Reteaching:** Based on the evidence collected and discussed during the observation and debriefing, the lesson study team makes changes to the lesson. The teachers will use

the data to craft revisions that will address problems and student misunderstandings identified in the first presentation. The team may meet several times to revise the lesson, which is taught to a new group of students. The same processes for observing and debriefing are used for the second teaching. The team sometimes uses the data collected and the notes from the discussion to develop the final version of the lesson.

### Reflecting and Sharing Results:

The lesson study team will record and share the research lesson they developed. The teachers publish a report about their work and include their reflections and a summary of group discussions (Yoshida, 1999). Lesson study reports are an important part of the process because they facilitate and capture the teachers' reflections about the lesson and about broader issues of teaching and learning. The teachers use the knowledge that they gain to plan and improve other lessons and their instructional practice. The results from one research lesson will inform future lesson study cycles and other professional development efforts.

Lewis, C. (2000, April). Lesson study: The core of Japanese professional development. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Yoshida, M. (1999, April). Lesson study [jogyo-kenkyu] in elementary mathematics in Japan: A case study. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada.

## Book Review:

# Communities that Learn, Lead, and Last: Building and Sustaining Educational Expertise

by Giselle O. Martin-Kniep (Jossey Bass, 2008, 213pp. ISBN: 9780787985134)

This latest offering from ASCD author, Giselle O. Martin-Kniep, begins with definitions and rationales for creating professional learning communities (PLC), and then quickly gets to the crux of the book: practical suggestions and solutions for keeping PLC efforts alive and flourishing.

The most helpful components are a



series of evaluations designed to keep groups focused and dynamic. These include rubrics that assess individual and organizational capacity to create PLCs, a self-assessment survey on participation, three rubrics that consider community learning, leadership, and staying power, and a rubric for assessing student capacity. These reflective tools are what nudge this book over into the “must read” column. They guide groups through an ongoing process of review of community goals, organizational systems, progress,

and results. The straightforward text is supported by tables, charts, and diagrams that are effective and clear.

This book suggests practical ways of establishing protocols for change and creating forums for meaningful conversations about teaching and learning. This selection is highly recommended for all schools, whether their professional learning communities are just beginning or already firmly established.

## Four pillars of adult learning

Entwined in the problem of making better use of the data we have is the challenge of helping adults learn to do that... teachers, principals, other administrators and staff all included. In her article “4 practices serve as pillars for adult learning” (Journal of Staff Development, Fall 2008), Ellie Drago-Severson helps the reader understand adult learning. She also provides useful suggestions to assist adult learners in moving forward.

Drago-Severson (a professor of education leadership at Columbia University's Teachers College) first provides a definition of adult growth or transformational learning, parsing out the different ways adults learn. Those are:

- People actively make sense of experience (constructivism) and make meaning in more complex ways over time (developmentalism)
- There is an instrumental way of knowing (a concrete orientation to life)

- There is also a socializing way of knowing (abstract thought, concern for the thoughts and feelings of others)
- Last, there exists a self-authoring way of knowing (ability to recognize, internalize, and process their own value system but has trouble accepting other competing or conflicting perspectives)

Drago-Severson finishes by examining how these four pillars, support transformational knowledge or growth. They are:

- *Teaming* – opens communication, reduces isolation, but initially challenges socializing “knowers” with conflict that commonly associates with the initial stages of teaming
- *Providing leadership roles* – the practice of distributive leadership challenges the different learners in different ways... self-authoring learners appreciate the opportunity to try to put their ideas into action, for example:

- *Collegial inquiry* – in goal-setting work, for example, “Instrumental knowers will assume that a supervisor knows what the right goals are and should tell them.” (p. 62). Thus leaders need to provide differential support for each type of learner.
- *Mentoring* – “A socializing knower... will feel best supported by a mentor's explicit acknowledgement of the importance of his beliefs and ideas.” (p. 63) And the other types have varying needs and require careful matching of mentor to mentee.

Drago-Severson closes this way:

While there might be different reasons for adults' preferences for particular practices (e.g. age, career phase), leaders would be wise to consider adults' ways of knowing. Learning-oriented leadership offers a promising way to support adult growth and, in turn, improvement of practice. (p. 63)

# Evaluating Professional Learning Communities

**H**ow do you evaluate and measure the success of professional learning communities? What standards, benchmarks, or outcomes have you identified as criteria for success? Measuring the effectiveness of professional learning communities is a challenging task. The good news is that help is on the way.

The GE Foundation has provided partial funding for APQC (American Productivity and Quality Center) [www.apqceducation.org](http://www.apqceducation.org) to work collaboratively with a number of national experts including the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) to help answer these evaluation questions. The Evaluating PLC's study will: Identify real-world examples from districts across the nation that have designed, implemented, and maintained successful PLCs and; Develop key outcome and performance measures to monitor PLCs on an on-going basis and determine their overall success.

APQC is a 30-year old nonprofit organization located in Houston that has conducted many benchmarking studies and will use a methodology that has proved successful in education, business, health care, and government. This study will build on their previous benchmarking project, Collaborative Cultures, to develop a foundation of learning, collaboration, professionalism, and trust that is needed for PLC's to work.

Special advisers to the project include the following national experts: Ann Delehant – education consultant with The Dolan Group, Dr. Richard P. DuFour; Dr. Shirley Hord – Scholar Laureate – NSDC; Joellen Killion - Deputy Executive Director – NSDC; Ann Kilcher - education consultant with The Dolan Group; Karl Clauset - Director, Whole-Faculty Study Groups National

Center; Kirk Vandersall - Managing Director - Arroyo Research Services

This project is focused on three main components:

- 1. Design and Planning:** This scope area will focus on how districts develop a framework for PLCs built on a culture of collaboration, quality-learning opportunities, and aligned to school and district goals. What is the right mix of PLCs in terms of grade level and subject area? What are the core responsibilities of central office staff, principals, facilitators, and members?
- 2. Implementation:** This scope area will focus on how districts put their plans into place and the lessons they learned. How do you ensure the PLCs are focused on learning and not on operations? Are there time-allocation models that work well at various grade levels to ensure PLCs can occur during the workday? What type of training should be offered to prepare people to work effectively in their PLC?
- 3. Support and Continuous Improvement:** This scope area will focus on how to monitor, evaluate, and modify your PLCs. One of the biggest challenges facing high quality, job-embedded professional learning, is developing an evaluation framework that is non-intrusive and cost effective. See examples from districts that have developed mature evaluation protocols and improvement programs.

The project's advisers have identified twelve best practice school districts from around the country including Dr. DuFour's former district, Adlai Stevenson High School District, IL. The project includes data collection, site visits,

and web casts. The study concludes with a two-day knowledge transfer session in February 2009. In addition to the best practice school districts, nearly 50 other districts are participating in the study including Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools in Michigan. The results of the study will be available in the Spring of 2009.

APQC has given MSDC access to the site visit web casts:

Click the link below to view and listen to the web cast titled *PLCs Are Everybody's Business - A Continuous Improvement Classroom*. Dr. Jay Marino, Associate Superintendent, describes how Cedar Rapids Community Schools (Iowa) PLC process is at the heart of their system of continuous school improvement. [https://admin.na3.acrobat.com/\\_a788755906/p55913504](https://admin.na3.acrobat.com/_a788755906/p55913504)

Listen as staff from Schaumburg SD 54 (Schaumburg SD) describe their PLC journey: <http://apqc.na3.acrobat.com/p18426189/>

Blue Valley School District (Overland Park, Kansas) site visit: <http://apqc.na3.acrobat.com/p56535907>

Site visit to Adlai Stevenson High School District (Lincolnshire, IL) and Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96 (Buffalo Grove IL - feeder school district to Adlai Stevenson) [https://admin.na3.acrobat.com/\\_a788755906/p25885054](https://admin.na3.acrobat.com/_a788755906/p25885054)