

An integrated conception of Lesson Study as a form of teacher-based Action Research.

John Elliott, University of East
Anglia.

Personal context of the author.

- ▶ With Stenhouse (1975) the development of the idea of ‘teacher as researcher.’ Personal high points were the Ford Teaching Project (1972) on Inquiry/discovery teaching and the publication in 1991 of *Action Research for Educational Change*.
- ▶ Early in the 21st Century the encounter with Learning Study as a participatory form of classroom research, developed by Lo Mun Ling and colleagues at the Hong Kong Institute of Education in the context of the post-changeover curriculum reforms. Lo and colleagues in Hong Kong blended the Japanese tradition of lesson study as a form of collaborative teacher research, with Marton and Booths *Variation Theory* (1997), developed in Sweden at Gothenburg University (See Lo, M.L., Marton, F., Pang, M.F., Pong, W.Y.2004.) High point was the appointment as Evaluator of the ‘Variation for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning’ (VITAL) Project in Hong Kong Schools (See Elliott and Yu 2008 and 2013).

The idea of the ‘Teacher as a researcher’.

- ▶ A ‘process model’ of teaching for understanding.- knowledge as an object of speculative thought, educational aims and principles of procedure.
- ▶ ‘Experimental teaching’ in which ideas and hypotheses about how to improve the quality of students’ learning experiences and the ethical agency of teachers are tested and further developed by teachers.
- ▶ ‘Professional learning communities’ collaboratively and systematically develop shared insights by comparing and contrasting cases of their own and each other’s practice., - ‘communities of practice’ provide the context for ‘collaborative research lessons’.
- ▶ The development by teachers and professional researchers of ‘a common vocabulary of concepts and a syntax of theory’ as a basis for talking about the problems of teaching and learning.

Making connections between the idea of the ‘teacher as researcher’ and learning study as forms of participatory teacher research.

- ▶ It was in the course of two evaluations of learning studies in Hong Kong (PIPS and VITAL) that the author had an opportunity to explore connections between the Stenhouseian conception of the ‘teacher as a researcher’ and lesson study informed by variation theory; the approach forged in Hong Kong to support curriculum and pedagogical reform.
- ▶ The ‘research lesson’ as part of a cyclical process of experimental teaching designed collaboratively by a ‘community of practice’.
- ▶ ‘Variation theory’ as the source of a common language of teaching and learning to capture and express teachers’ self-understanding of their work, which is always *provisional*. The ‘*object of learning: intended, enacted, lived*’ and the *critical aspects and features* that need to be discerned to extend and deepen insight and understanding. Must not be confused with ‘*learning objectives/outcomes*’. Teachers do not need theory to generalise beyond their own experience but to systematically understand their experience as ethical agents.

Underpinning the idea of ‘the teacher as researcher’, the concept of Lesson Study, and the use of variation theory as a pedagogical tool is a dynamic view of *the nature of understanding* which *planning by objectives* distorts.

For Stenhouse:

- ▶ both students and teachers develop understanding-the teacher is cast in the role of learner.
- ▶ understanding as an aim cannot be achieved, only deepened.
- ▶ there must always be a dispute about what constitutes a valid understanding. Both teacher and the group have to accept an exploration of the nature of understanding as part of their task.

Lesson study and variation theory both presuppose a dynamic concept of *teaching for understanding* as a pedagogical aim.

Lesson Study as:

- ▶ a collaborative and interactive process of action and research to improve teaching and learning;
- ▶ cycles of *research lessons*;

Variation Theory as:

- ▶ a dynamic rather than static theory of understanding.

“Through the course of teaching and learning with their students, teachers gain a better understanding of the object of learning. Hence, the object of learning is not invariable. Based on students’ reactions and their more in-depth understanding of the object of learning, teachers regularly make adjustments to it.” (Lo Mun Ling 2012).

What is Lesson Study?

- ▶ It is carried out by a group of teachers (2 or more members)
- ▶ Focuses on the collaborative development of a lesson defined in terms of a topic rather than a unit of time.
- ▶ The study proceeds through cycles of planning, teaching, and evidence-based discussion.
- ▶ In each cycle a collaboratively planned lesson is taught by a different teacher, while the other teachers collect observational data, which is then discussed in a post lesson conference as a basis for moving into the next cycle of planning a revised lesson, teaching and discussion.
- ▶ Post-lesson interviews with individual pupils or a focus group about their learning experiences at the end of each cycle maybe conducted at the end of each cycle by one of the teachers or an external facilitator.
- ▶ The teacher group may be facilitated by an expert specialising in the curriculum area concerned.
- ▶ The findings of the study are rendered open to discussion with other teachers inside and outside the school e.g. via a full-text report or research poster.

What is a Learning Study?

- ▶ A learning study is a lesson study that is informed by a theory, which focuses attention on pupils' and teachers' various understandings of *the object of learning* and how they change and develop over time.
- ▶ The *object of learning* depicts the subject matter to be learned and the learning goals related to it, but it does not describe how this subject matter is to be handled by the teacher.
- ▶ Objects of learning' can be differentiated according to context. They may be 'intended', 'enacted' or 'lived.' Students do not always learn what is intended. The teacher may enact an 'object of learning' in a lesson that does not express the 'intended object of learning' before the lesson, and a student may encounter an 'object of learning' as a lived experience that was not intended or enacted by the teacher.
- ▶ Three types of variation: V1, V2, and V3. V1 refers to variation in students' understanding of the subject matter. V2 refers to variation in teachers' ways of handling the object of learning (topic) in planning a research lesson. e.g. in their discernment of its critical features. V3 refers to variation as a guiding principle of lesson design i.e. the use teachers make of patterns of variation in enabling students to discern critical features of the object of learning.

Main features of a course at the university of East Anglia U.K. designed to implement lesson study conceived as a form of action research.

- ▶ Six months duration (March - August).
- ▶ Attendance at six three-hour sessions at UEA, consisting of lectures and seminars on Lesson Study Methodology and Methods that draw on a comprehensive and up-to-date body of international literature on the theory and practice of Lesson Study.
- ▶ Designing, Conducting, and Presenting a Collaborative School-based Lesson Study with support from the Course Tutor (three consultation visits to each school/team undertaking a Lesson Study).
- ▶ Ideally the course will recruit a team of 2-4 teachers per school. Individual teachers from a school may join the course if they can secure the support of an in-school or cross-school group of teachers willing to undertake a lesson study with them.
- ▶ A CPD non-credit bearing option that concludes with the presentation and discussion of a collaborative lesson study to professional peers and academic staff at the UEA.
- ▶ An option to upgrade for the award of 30 credits towards a Masters-degree by producing a 4000 word Individual Learning Narrative and attending an additional session at UEA.

Emerging themes that are relevant to an assessment of conceptual and practical impact.

- ▶ 1. Lesson Study as an alternative to performance management of teachers in schools. (5 citations)
- ▶ 2. Lesson study as formative practice and Stenhouse's idea of the 'teacher as researcher'. (5 ct)
- ▶ 3. The 'process' rather than the 'objectives' model of learning as a basis for designing 'research lessons.' (5 ct)
- ▶ 4. Lesson Study as a basis for designing cross-curricular innovations in classrooms. (3 ct)
- ▶ 6. Theory-informed lesson study as a basis for questioning beliefs and assumptions embedded in current practice. (6 ct)
- ▶ 7. The public presentation of lesson studies as a basis for school-wide professional learning (3 ct)

The resonant feature of Lesson Study for English teachers - collaboration.

Participants particularly emphasised the value of the collaborative element of LS. It has been the main feature that teachers return to and the one element of LS that has the greatest appeal. LS provided a genuinely collaborative framework whereby teachers could be in each other's classrooms without fear of judgment.

Perspectives of wider school improvement - 1

Two of the participants spoke of their altered perceptions of how to effect meaningful teacher improvement and perhaps this shows how expecting a wider group of teachers to be involved in LS, not just those already demonstrating highest quality, could support long-term sustainable improvement in schools:

“The hardest thing about my job is having a dialogue with someone about something that hasn’t worked [in a lesson/during an observed lesson] for all sorts of reasons. The good thing about LS is it gives you a framework for those conversations and that’s true of the group [this year’s cpd group] too.” (Teacher Q)

Perspectives of wider school improvement - 2

- ▶ Whilst the respective senior leaders (in all but one) were not directly involved in the LS themselves, the chosen 'object of learning' correlated with the overarching issues the schools were facing.

Issues to address - knowledgeable Snr Leadership.

- ▶ Those teachers who facilitate LS across a school need first-hand experience of it to understand its potential for impact and organisational complexities. LS also needs senior leaders to support its implementation with a clear strategy for embedding it into school policy because the demands on the teachers involved are subtle, complex and needs to have status.