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Lesson Study, Vietnamese Style: Bringing Meaning to a Hollow Shell

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Introduction

Teachers in rural primary and lower secondary schools in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam engage in many activities in grade level and department teams that characterize “lesson study” in China and Japan. However, the way these activities are implemented often focuses more on procedure than quality. As a result such activities function more like “hollow shells” than the rich opportunities for teacher development for which they are intended.

At least that has been the case in the rural primary and lower secondary schools that are part of the Cantho University-Michigan State University project prior to its initiation (and continuing to this day for some teams where the chair or vice-chair is a staunch supporter of more traditional teaching). However, once the project’s support system is in place, in most teams such activities undergo a transformation that supports many of the goals of “lesson study.”

This paper has seven parts: 1) a brief review of the important potential role of professional communities play in improving practice 2) a description of activities that took place in these schools in grade level and department teams prior to this project, 3) the components of a new form of teacher support system introduced by this project, 4) the effects of this new support system on student learning, 5) the effects of this project on these grade level and department teams, 6) steps needed to further improve the CTU-MSU project and 7) questions for those who research “lesson study” activities in China and Japan.

Professional Communities and Lesson Study Components

A substantial body of literature now attests to the contributions teachers’ professional communities make to professional development. (McLaughlin and Talbert (2001), Grossman et al (2001), Garet et al, 2001; Little, 2002; Wilson & Berne, 1999).

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In China school-based teaching research groups represent a common form of professional development (Han, 2007; Hu, 2005; Paine, Fang, & Wilson, 2003; Paine & Ma, 1999; Wang & Paine, 2003). In a recent dissertation, Han (2007) describes how teacher research groups and public lessons in an urban primary school improved teachers' content knowledge, pedagogical practice, and ability to assess student learning. In Japan, "lesson study" groups of teachers collaboratively refine a lesson by focusing on student learning ("lesson study") (Fernandez & Yoshida, 2004; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999).

According to Schwille & Dembele (2007), the most important features of Japanese lesson study and Chinese teachers' research groups include:

- Using the teachers' own classrooms as laboratories for professional development
- The public nature of teaching
- The importance of teachers working together
- The 'bifocal' nature of lesson study (using specific lessons to investigate larger issues)
- Action research as a means of professional development
- Emphasis on understanding student thinking
- Cumulative impact through writing and dissemination of reports
- Balance between teacher initiative and outside advice and guidance (pp.112-113).

While the meaning of "lesson study" and its enactment in these two countries no doubt have important differences, participants in these forms of school-based teacher development do seem to engage in a broad range of professional activities, including collective lesson planning, preparing and conducting public lessons, creating curriculum materials, observing and reflecting upon lessons, engaging in action research around issues generated by classroom practice, and disseminating their insights, among others.

Vietnam

Lesson Study as a Hollow Shell

In the Mekong Delta of Vietnam grade level teams in primary schools and department level teams in lower secondary and upper secondary schools carry out many of these same activities. District policy requires these teams to meet two times per month. Activities are to include:

- Reviewing lesson plans (done by the department or grade level head)
- Discussing the use of teaching aids
- Providing support for teachers as they prepare for public lessons and district/provincial competitions; attending such lessons when possible
- Organizing and carrying out classroom observations (each teacher carries out 2 observations of other teachers each month. The department or grade level head carries out four such observations/month)
- Mentoring new teachers (done by the department head or grade level head)
- Planning and implementing a workshop for the entire school on a theme or issue

of interest by the grade level or department teams.

In addition, all teachers are required to carry out periodic public lessons, observed by other teachers and administrators (sometimes including district administrators).

Other responsibilities of grade level and department teams include: preparing students for district and provincial competitions, monitoring school clubs and helping with other school activities as needed.

Through interviews, observations and participation in the life of 7 rural project schools (4 primary and 3 lower secondary) for the past 2-6 years (depending on when the school joined the project), the following generalizations can be made about how these groups implemented their responsibilities (at least until this project). It should be noted that the many of the same practices continue in the few instances where the Chair or Vice-Chair of a grade level or department team is a traditional teacher.

1. Teachers just wrote up lesson plans and turned them in to the chair who signed them. There was no discussion of the concepts embedded in the lesson or the kinds of questions a teacher might ask students as the lesson unfolded. The focus was on whether the lesson plan had all the points listed in the teacher's guide.
2. Seldom, if ever, were teaching aids (their use, construction, connection to concepts, etc.) discussed.
3. Teachers did receive support as they prepared for public lessons and district/provincial competitions. But until recently, the focus was on preparing a good traditional lesson. The nature of this support changed, however, after the introduction of this project (discussed below).
4. Classroom observations were carried out in ways that did not promote teacher self-reflection and growth. Observers assigned a "grade" (usually "excellent," occasionally "good," but never "poor.") for the lesson and feedback was generally confined to minor issues (e.g., the quality of the handwriting, how the textbook was used or how something was displayed). Feedback focused on what was "wrong" and telling the teacher what needs to be done so it will be "right" next time. Issues of content were seldom discussed. The same held true for issues of pedagogy. Feedback focused on what needed to be changed or improved.
5. The grade level head or department head mentored new teachers into a traditional teaching role.

In other words, before this project (and currently in grade level and department teams where the chair and vice-chair are not project participants) the components that could have contributed to improved teaching and learning functioned more like hollow shells, implemented in formal, mechanistic ways that supported and perpetuated traditional teaching (teacher-centered instruction, rote memorization, and factual recall).

Why? The Context of Educational Change in Vietnam

Until the late 1990s, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) remained mired in traditional ways of thinking about content and pedagogy. MOET is now promoting more active learning in Vietnamese classrooms. The task is substantial given the centralized nature of the educational system, a packed curriculum that encourages a focus on content coverage and factual recall, a high-stakes testing system at each level of schooling, parental concern that students do well on such tests, a lack of experience and understanding by teachers of more active learning methods, and a supervisory system that emphasizes correction rather than support. These factors operate with special force in rural schools which traditionally are under-resourced and staffed by teachers who lack the training of those in cities or urban areas. Together these factors help to explain the “hollow shell” syndrome in project rural schools (and likely in rural primary and secondary schools throughout the Mekong Delta and elsewhere in rural Vietnam).

What is this Project “Integrating School Reform with Community Development?” Who are the actors and what roles do they play?

As the name implies, the goal of this project to improve household income in very poor rural villages in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The project is located in Hau Giang province, the poorest province in the Mekong Delta and focuses attention on three of the poorest villages in this province. It began in May 2001. The first phase ended in 2005 and the second phase is expected to conclude in 2009. Cantho University has primary responsibility for the project. It is the largest and most prestigious university in the Delta. Michigan State University faculty were invited to participate in the development of this project and serve as advisers. Modest financial support comes from U.S. corporations and foundations (approximately \$120,000 per year) The two universities also provide in-kind support.

To understand the project, think of three circles (Wheeler 2006). The largest represents the community development component. Ten full-time community development workers assist farmers diversify sources of income through workshops, a micro-credit program and on-going technical support. The project focuses on animal husbandry, aquaculture, household gardens, rice-seed projects, and integrated farming systems projects. Community development staff work in close collaboration with local community organizations (e.g., women’s unions, farmers’ unions, veterans’ unions).

The second circle of activity is smaller and focuses on participating schools and educational change. Attention is given to primary schools and lower secondary schools as they are the highest academic levels that most rural students will obtain. Teachers are trained in how to use active learning strategies to promote the understanding of concepts, build critical thinking skills and increase student awareness of environmental issues.

The third circle overlaps the first two. Summer projects involve teachers, students and community members in two ways: demonstrating new agricultural techniques (e.g., composting, organic gardening, IPM rice) that are then diffused into villages through

community organizations and project community development workers; and studies of local community problems (e.g., dengue fever) with campaigns to address them. Lessons from these summer activities are brought back to the classrooms and provide new opportunities to teach the existing curriculum in more relevant ways. Student clubs provide opportunities for students and teachers to continue to explore community issues during the academic year.

This paper focuses on the second circle: schools and the support system used to improve teaching and learning (Ho, H., & Bui, C. 2006).

A Different Approach to School-Based Teacher Development

Principles underlying the project's approach to teacher development include:

1. The centrality of content

If teachers do not understand the concepts embedded in a lesson, all the support to learn active learning methods will not result in the quality of learning desired by this project. Adequate content knowledge is especially a problem for primary and lower secondary school teachers. Most only had a lower secondary education, some an upper secondary education. Upgrading courses run by various organizations have enabled project teachers to attain more advanced degrees but without necessarily gaining an in-depth disciplinary knowledge of content.

As discussed below, the support system used in this project focuses teacher attention on the concepts embedded in a specific lesson, how to engage students in learning these concepts and how to assess student understanding.

2. Participatory Focused Workshops

Teacher workshops need to be held close to the time teachers will actually be teaching, focus on specific topics (e.g., finding the concepts underlying a lesson, how to use group work effectively, questioning strategies to promote student understanding, making and using teaching aids to teach concepts, etc.), actively involve participants and provide ample time for practice. These are key characteristics of this project's approach to workshops. It is significantly different from prevailing practice in Vietnam, although changes are underway.

In general, Ministry, provincial and district workshops are carried out during the summer months, usually cover a number of topics, often use "chalk and talk" methods to explain active learning methods, and lack any follow up support after the training is over. Moreover, all the teachers in the local area are required to participate, which means workshops are overcrowded.

3. Support once back at the schools

Once teachers return to their classrooms, they need on-going support to implement content and pedagogical practices learned at workshops. They need on-going support to understand concepts, how to engage students in learning them and how to assess what students have learned. While this could occur within grade level and department teams, as indicated above, this did not begin to happen until this project.

This project uses several strategies to provide such support:

a. Support team teachers

In each of the seven project schools 1-2 teachers serve as “support team” teachers (STTs). Freed from some teaching responsibilities, these STTs serve as liaisons between the school and Cantho University faculty involved in the project. In this role, among other things, they participate in the weekly discussions of specific lessons between teachers and Cantho University (CTU) faculty (see b), observe the lesson, participate in feedback sessions, work with other teachers in the same way when CTU faculty are not there, open their own classrooms to demonstrate active learning strategies for other teachers in the building, and have various responsibilities for learning activities on the school grounds (see below).

b. Cantho University Faculty and Faculty from the Teacher Training College for Primary/Lower Secondary Teachers

Sixteen Cantho University faculty and faculty from the Teacher Training College for Primary and Lower Secondary Teachers visit participating teachers once a week to observe lessons, provide feedback and plan collaboratively lessons for the following week. During these visits STTs participate in these meetings/observations/feedback sessions.

c. The Curriculum Analysis (CA) cycle: Concepts, Pedagogy, Application and Observation and Feedback

The focus of these meetings is on the CA cycle. Over the life of the project, this CA cycle has evolved into 5 steps:

Step 1: teacher reviews a specific lesson, identifies the “big ideas” or key concepts to be taught, considers what teaching aids might be used, what questions might be asked of students, what activities might get students talking and working together, how students might apply what they were learning to the real world and what assessment strategies might be used to see what students had learned.

Step 2: The teacher meets with a CTU/Teacher Training College faculty member whose content expertise is in the area of the lesson to discuss the

lesson plan. The STT sometimes attends these sessions. Together they discuss the “big ideas,” teaching strategies, teaching aids, application and assessment strategies. These sessions can be rather lengthy, sometimes up to an hour.

Step 3: The teacher revises the lesson plan. The STT often helps with the development of teaching aids and other advice (depending on whether their expertise is in the same content area or not).

Step 4: The faculty member and the STT observe the lesson.

Step 5: The three of them meet for an extensive debriefing. The key approach is one of “**supportive feedback.**” Rather than the prevailing “check and control” approach where the teacher is told what was “done wrong” and what should be done to “correct it,” the approach used seeks to learn from the teacher how she made sense of the lesson, what she might do differently next time, and how she responds to observations from STT and university colleagues. The focus is on building the capacity of the teacher to reflect on their own teaching and on what students are learning.

d. Using the School Grounds for Learning

A key premise of this approach to teacher development is that students learn in many settings, not just the classroom. To promote student learning, teachers develop lessons that can be taught on the school grounds or using the school garden (each school has a school garden). Teachers also assign students homework that requires that they apply concepts learned to the real world by interviewing parents or neighbors, solving a problem using materials readily available at home, or collecting artifacts that the teacher will use in the next day’s lesson. Such activities provide new learning opportunities for rural students who lack the informal opportunities that many urban students enjoy with access to museums, parks and travel with their parents.

e. Observing Lessons within the School and Cross-school Observations

Not only do STTs open their classrooms to other teachers to demonstrate more active learning strategies to promote the understanding of concepts, so too do other project teachers. This enables teachers in the same content area the opportunity to observe and participate in feedback sessions. This opportunity is not restricted to project teachers but they are usually the ones to take advantage of this. Similarly, cross-school observations by project teachers occur at regular intervals, specifically when a lesson using the school grounds/garden or a particularly difficult concept is taught.

The Effects of this New Support System on Student Learning, Teaching, and University Teaching

From 2001-2004 (Phase One) a series of studies were carried out to determine the effects of this approach to teacher development. Results reported in 2005 showed that:

- Students did better in project classes than students in non-project classes. Outcomes for end-of-semester tests were statistically significant at the .05 to .01 levels, as reported at the end of Phase 1 (February 2005). A cohort of lower secondary students who had only project classes grades 7-9 did significantly better on the 9th grade exam than students in non-project classes.
- Students developed critical thinking skills and the ability to speak and present arguments in front of adults, according to teacher interviews.
- Students liked project classes more than classes that do not use this method, according to student interviews.
- Teachers liked this new approach better than traditional teaching. In the process of using active learning, they have begun to change their views on where knowledge comes from. Their sense of professionalism has increased as a result of this project.
- Parental support for project classes was very strong. They routinely request that their children be placed in project classrooms.
- Principals have increased their understanding of effective teaching practices, learned how to provide support for teachers when they use the school grounds for learning, and have improved their relationships with communities.
- Closer connections have developed between the school and higher administrative organizations (district and provincial offices of education) in support of the active learning approaches used in project classrooms.
- CTU faculty have learned valuable lessons in how to provide supportive feedback to teachers on content and pedagogy. They also use experiences from working in schools in their CTU classes in training prospective teachers (i.e., effective classroom management practices, how to develop relevant teaching aids using local materials, how to apply the content to real life). They have also developed relationships with classroom teachers that will extend beyond the life of the project.

In terms of teacher change, results showed that project strategies led to an increase of 52% in the use of active learning strategies and a decrease of 23% in more traditional forms of teaching by participants in the project.

Did this support system affect how grade level and department teams functioned? If so, in what ways?

Participation in this project is voluntary. Teachers and administrators invite the project into the school. At the beginning in each school only a small number of teachers volunteered to join the project. Now at least ½ and up to 4/5ths of the teachers in each school are members of the project.

In each school, this project's support system began as an independent structure with its own set of procedures. Within a year, in each school, the support system has influenced how grade level and department teams function while maintaining its own separate identity. This process is called "micro-expansion."

For example, in the Math/Physics Department at one lower secondary school, the chair, who is also a STT for the project, adapted the project's CA cycle for all teachers in his department. This includes a discussion with the teacher about the "big ideas" in the lesson plan, teaching aids, and pedagogical strategies. During the feedback session supportive feedback is used (Interview, September 22, 2007).

A grade 5 head (also a STT) reported that teachers in his team now work in very different ways. Instead of reporting on the number of observations done, handing in lesson plans and giving them a cursory look before ending the meeting, teachers now focus on the lesson using a format designed by the project to help teachers uncover the concepts and ways to teach them using active learning strategies, locally made teaching aids, and productive questions (Interview, October 14, 2007).

A grade 4 head (also a STT) reported that before the project, when he did classroom observations, he just looked at whether the teacher used teaching aids and how they displayed them. Now he looks at how effectively the teachers use such aids to guide students to the "big ideas" underlying a lesson. He also focuses attention on the kinds of questions teachers use to see if they help students understand the content. In other words, he reported that he (and other grade heads in the project) often do what CTU faculty do when they visit teachers to help with lesson planning. As a result he feels more confident in his role and works more effectively with colleagues. (Interview, October 14, 2007).

A grade 3 team vice-head (also a STT) reported that she now uses meetings to work with teachers in making teaching aids while discussing how to use them effectively. She encourages grade 2 teachers to attend these meetings as well as non project teachers at both grade levels. She encourages these teachers to visit her class and then visits some of their classes and reports seeing them using some of the strategies she used in her class (Interview, October 14, 2007).

Two other grade level chairs who were not STTs but regular teachers reported they now used meetings to focus on whether teachers understood the main ideas, used appropriate teaching aids, and productive questions. None of this was a part of the grade level meetings before the project (one of these schools joined the project three years ago, the other two years ago) (Interviews, October 14, 2007).

The project has also affected teacher preparation for district competitions and public lessons. While teachers use their grade level/department teams for suggestions, they rely heavily on project STTs and CTU faculty for advice on their lesson plans and for suggestions when they teach to a class in preparation for the competition or official public lesson (Interviews, September-October, 2007).

The project has also affected the kinds of school-wide staff development activities departments/grade level teams now propose. For example, for the Math/Physics department, the topic this semester will be on how to improve the performance of weak students across disciplines, something that has been ignored until now.

What accounts for project influence? Much depends on whether a project teacher or project STT holds an official position such as chair or vice-chair. Without such legitimacy, there is only so much influence a project teacher can have in such meetings. In one department at a lower secondary school, the STT teacher, who is only a member, reported that the head, who is very traditional in his thinking about teaching and learning, just gives lesson plans a cursory look and signs them. There is no discussion of who has been observed and what was learned. If people raise questions about a problem encountered in their teaching, others just listen and no real help or advice is provided (Interview, September 22, 2007).

Clearly there are advantages to this “micro” expansion of components of the project into the standard operating procedures and ways of thinking in grade level and department teams. Reaching more teachers is certainly a major one. While the project has steadily expanded its numbers in each school, there are some teachers who do not wish to join and some who have left the project for a variety of reasons.**

When departments or grade level teams use methods from the project, this provides a supportive environment for those not in the project to make at least some changes in their teaching. It also reinforces/rewards the practices of those already in the project since these are now seen as the norm for what teaching should be like.

A second is sustainability. While outside funding provides financial support for CTU/TT College faculty and STTs, such funding will eventually come to an end. It may be that breathing life into grade level and department teams represents the best hope for long-term improvement of teaching and learning in rural schools.

Areas for improvement

There are several activities in Chinese and Japanese “lesson study” practices that do not appear in grade level or department team discussions in schools participating in this project in Vietnam. The careful attention to student work for what it might yield in the way of understanding student conceptions is not a part of grade level or department team discussions. Nor is any attention given to action research.

Student thinking does figure into the support system of this project, however. During the discussion of the lesson plan a focus is on the kinds of questions the teacher will use during the lesson. Considerable effort is given to helping teachers develop questions that

** These include family issues, such as ill parents, pregnancy, or children with special needs, a reluctance to actually make changes in teaching, concern over the time commitment involved in participating in this project and simply the belief that they have “learned enough” to satisfy district inspectors who visit periodically.

get students to think and understand concepts. A natural part of this discussion is student thinking. How to help students understand concepts is also discussed when teaching strategies are examined. Then talking about student thinking is discussed again during the debriefing after the lesson is taught. Here constructive feedback is used to help the teacher think more about student thinking. But more needs to be done in this area.

To date, there has been no effort to develop a program of action research for teachers in the project.

The most significant weakness in this project to date is the focus on changing individual teacher behavior. One of the greatest contributions of lesson study in China and Japan is the collective learning of teachers in a specific discipline at a specific grade level in content and pedagogical practice. While teachers at the lower secondary level in a specific discipline often observe a lesson with CTU faculty and the STT and participate in the feedback session, the basic focus of this project to date has been on changing teachers one by one. While the project consistently demonstrates improved individual teacher learning and changed practice, this individual focus has limitations in terms of systemic change within a school. As indicated above, diffusion has occurred but the puzzle of how to reach teachers not in the project remains a major barrier to expanded effects within a school and to sustained improvement.

More attention, therefore, needs to be devoted these issues and to ways of consciously infusing key elements of the project's support system into grade level and department teams. To date, such infusion has occurred more as a bi-product of teacher involvement in this project. Four strategies will be pursued:

1. Working with principals to see that project teachers become chairs or vice-chairs of department and grade level teams. With such legitimacy come greater opportunities for influencing member practice, especially among those who are not part of the project.
2. Workshops on content and pedagogy specifically tailored to department and grade level teacher needs (as defined by these groups). This will be a way to reach non project teachers in a more systematic way.
3. Greater attention to public lessons and how project staff can support teachers in their preparation, delivery and debriefing.
4. The initiation of workshops and support for teachers to do action research projects and to disseminate lessons learned to other teachers.

A Concluding Question: Is the “hollow shell” problem just in the schools in this project?

The fine-grained analysis of how lesson study groups, teacher research groups and public lessons work in China and Japan (Han 2007, Fernandez & Yoshida, 2004) have been done in urban schools. In rural schools (primary and lower secondary) in this project, a number of similar functions were found but the way they operated reinforced traditional teaching (teacher-centered, rote memorization, factual knowledge). Feedback after

observing a lesson focused on correction and what needed to be done to make it “right” the next time. This problem was called the “hollow shell” where form triumphed over substance.

One wonders what a careful examination of how rural schools in China and Japan enact lesson study might uncover. Could there be a “hollow shell” problem there as well?

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