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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

## Lesson study puts a collaborative lens on student learning

By Anthony Armstrong

Collaboration, it turns out, is easier to value than it is to implement. The recent *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Preparing Students for College and Careers* (2010) shows that most middle and high school teachers (65%) believe that opportunities for collaborative teaching would have a major impact on their ability to effectively address the different learning needs of individual students. In an earlier survey, though, only 22% of teachers reported that teachers in their school regularly observe each other and give feedback (MetLife 2009).

The challenges to collaboration include a tradition of autonomy in classrooms, time and scheduling constraints, lack of supportive leadership, and pressure for individual accountability. The Denver (Colo.) Public Schools (DPS) district, though, has found a way to create a collaborative change environment through lesson study, a professional learning approach that was so successful, 100% of the participating teachers voted to bring it back next year.

Lesson study is a structured process adapted from Japan that enables small groups of teachers to plan, observe, analyze, and refine actual classroom lessons. Because the focus is on the effectiveness of a lesson itself and what students learn, rather than on an individual teacher's performance, the method helps reduce the anxiety



and resistance to being observed that some teachers feel.

In the fall of 2010, in partnership with the Developmental Studies Center (DSC) and with MetLife Foundation support, Denver teacher effectiveness coaches set out to learn the lesson study process from DSC. Denver's coaches watched as DSC facilitators began leading teachers through lesson study cycles in multiple Denver schools. A month later, the coaches joined the process as participants. For the final rounds in the spring, the Denver coaches led the study sessions with staff from DSC acting as coaches. "The ultimate goal," said Peter Brunn, director of professional development for DSC, "is to get the facilitators to be self-sufficient in lesson study so they can move on to implement it themselves in other schools."

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### MetLife Foundation

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### THREE PHASES

Each lesson study cycle consists of three phases: planning a lesson, observing student reactions to the lesson, and then analyzing those reactions. While the phases seem simple enough on the surface, they become highly complex in their execution. “Even if teachers are accustomed to collaborating in their own professional learning communities,” said Brunn, “lesson study is different because it can be risky to share multiple points of view that can be sources of disagreement, such as those on pedagogy and child development. These types of topics are confronted in lesson study and necessitate a great deal of knowledge about building a team and a learning community.”

#### PHASE ONE: PLAN THE LESSON

The first phase in lesson study is planning the lesson, where the team of teachers selects and plans a lesson to observe. For the beginning teams in Denver, Brunn had the teachers read and discuss research on lesson study and set team norms before picking a lesson to use. Beverly Short, one of Denver’s teacher effectiveness coaches participating in the pilot program, felt this was a critical step. “You have to help the teachers get into the right mindset,” said Short. “We started preparing for phase one by watching a DVD of other teachers going through the lesson study process. Then we read and discussed an article from researchers in Japan. Overall, it took about 40-45 minutes for us to get into the right frame of mind for planning the lesson.”

Because planning a lesson can be a complex process, made exponentially so when trying to reach consensus within a team, Brunn recommended using an already-prepared lesson so the teams could spend more time focused on the observations and analysis.

Once the group selected a lesson, each team collectively completed a detailed lesson-planning form. See page 4 for a sample lesson planning form. The group had to reach consensus on what actions the teacher would take to administer the lesson.

Next, the group had to determine the intended student behavior for each action, meaning what behaviors the observers would see in the students as a result of the teacher’s actions.

Then, for each intended behavior, the group determined what anticipated difficulties the students could have. “For example, if the students were supposed to have accountable talk with each other,” explained Short, “they would have their bodies turned and facing each other and be talking. If a student was having difficulties, they may be

#### DEVELOPMENTAL STUDIES CENTER

[www.devstu.org](http://www.devstu.org)

Developmental Studies Center (DSC) is a nonprofit organization that facilitates professional development and develops school-based and after-school programs. DSC’s work with Denver Public Schools is helping refine an approach to lesson study that can be introduced efficiently and cost effectively. Their work with Denver continues, with plans to expand to 12-15 other districts.

off topic or by themselves.”

Finally, the group had to decide in advance what the teacher intervention would be for each difficulty listed. “That way,” said Short, “if a student was off task or not demonstrating a behavior, the group had already decided what action the teacher would take.”

This part of the planning process offered valuable opportunities for teacher discovery, said Maggie Gordon, teacher effectiveness coach with DPS. “One teacher would casually ask if another had the kids sitting on the carpet, and that would lead to a 20-minute conversation about how where students are sitting can lead to intentional partners, accountable talks, and opportunities to start doing informal assessments. In the past, those types of rich conversations have been lost.”

#### PHASE TWO: OBSERVE THE LESSON

Once the lesson, actions, potential difficulties, and teacher interventions were planned in great detail, the teams moved on to conducting the research lesson.

Observing student reactions is where lesson study departs from typical uses of teacher observation. Instead of focusing solely on the actions of the teacher, observers collected data on behaviors or objectives identified in the planning process. See pages 5-7 for sample data collection forms.

Short notes that it is important for teachers who are observing students during this phase not to interact with students. “We learned that when teachers observe their colleagues, they frequently ask students questions about their lessons or about the teacher, but this interferes with the observation process.”

#### PHASE THREE: ANALYZE THE DATA AND DISCUSS THE LESSON

After observing the students, each team met for a debriefing where the teams analyzed the students’ reactions to each part of the lesson. More than just looking at what parts of the lesson didn’t resonate with students, the teachers also analyzed what parts of the lessons worked for students and

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#### Learning Forward BELIEF

Student learning increases when educators reflect on professional practice and student progress.

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why. This in-depth analysis helped the teachers understand how the students made sense of the materials and what each student's reactions revealed about that student as a learner.

"During this phase, our goal was to help teachers think about their own instruction and their students' thinking in a different way," said Brunn. "We asked, are students engaged, how do we define that engagement, and how do we know when they are engaged?"

Brunn used a variety of approaches to analyze the student observations, including "time sweeps" that measured how much time the teacher or students spent talking. "We analyzed the data to learn what it told us about the lesson. Often it moved the teachers to rethink how they dominate lessons."

For Short, an organized facilitation process helped create a smooth and comfortable analysis. "After the observations, the person who taught the lesson would journal their thoughts while the observers wrote on sticky notes what they thought went well and what could change. We would post these somewhere in the room for everyone to see and walk around the room reading the notes before we began our discussion."

The big payoff in phase three, said Short, came in determining the implications for what they learned. "The implications are the highest value. When the teachers would say 'This is what I've learned, and this is what I'm going to do,' it was usually a big list. We would ask them to choose two things to do and follow up for accountability."

## WHY LESSON STUDY WORKS

At the end of the 2010-11 school year, 100% of the participating teachers listed lesson study as one of the professional learning endeavors they wanted to see return the next year. The Denver coaches attributed this popular-

### EDUCATORS AGREE THAT COLLABORATION CONTRIBUTES TO SUCCESS

- Greater collaboration would have a major impact on improving student achievement, according to 67% of teachers and 78% of principals surveyed.
- Nine out of 10 teachers agreed that other teachers contribute to their success in the classroom.
- Teachers in schools with higher levels of collaboration are more likely to be very satisfied with teaching as a career (68% vs. 54% in schools with lower levels of collaboration).

**Source: MetLife. (2009).** *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Collaborating for student success.* New York: Author.

ity to two aspects of lesson study--teacher ownership and a student-centered focus.

This feeling of ownership, noted Short, helped even the most reluctant participants by removing the inclination to feel defensive when something didn't work. "Because the teachers must collectively plan the minutest details of the lesson, the process becomes about lesson design. They take ownership of the design and when it doesn't work, they say, 'It's the way we worded that. We got from the kids what we asked for. We need to shift our thinking in what we asked them to produce.'"

The second attribute of lesson study's success is the shift in focus from the teacher's actions to the student's responses, further removing them from the inclination to feel defensive. "When the observers go into the classroom, they record student behaviors in the data collection form," said Brunn. "Instead of looking at and evaluating the actions of one teacher, the group of observers is carefully watching the students."

## FINAL RESULTS

While it is too early to measure results in test scores, Short notes the impact that lesson study has on teachers' abilities to differentiate instruction. "When we collect data and see that only 19 out of 26 kids understood the lesson, what are the implications for next steps? That is when differentiation is on the table. We realize that we didn't reach all of our students, so we ask, whom did we not reach and why, and what are we going to do about it?"

For teacher learning, all of the Denver coaches noted significant change in teacher collaboration and willingness to adopt change. "A lot of teachers walked away with transferable skills that were good for any subject they teach," observed Short. "They would walk away and say, 'Wow, that is a more efficient way of doing something, so I will try it,' or they may tell another teacher, 'I can really see the difference in the way you call on students and ask the kind of questions you are asking.'"

## REFERENCES

**MetLife. (2010).** *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Preparing students for college and careers.* New York: Author.

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**Anthony Armstrong (anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org) is publications editor at Learning Forward.** 

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## Preparing for the research lesson

Teachers collectively complete this form to plan every detail of a lesson, including teacher actions, intended and unintended student behaviors, teacher interventions, etc. This form will likely need to be copied to two pages for one lesson.

**Date of lesson:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Teacher:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Classroom:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Lesson purpose:** In this lesson, the students will \_\_\_\_\_

When I do this in Step X of the lesson ...	... the students might do/say this <i>(list possible responses)</i>	Tally during observation	On which student responses might I want to intervene? What will I do?

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# Word-for-word record 1: What does the teacher ask?

Use this tool, parts one and two, if your team wants to examine the types of questions teachers can ask and how they affect student engagement and learning. This form may be completed by one or more observers, depending on your team's focus and needs.

**Date of lesson:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Teacher:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Classroom:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Each time the teacher asks a question, record the exact question and the time.

 <b>TEACHER'S QUESTION</b>	 <b>TIME ASKED</b>

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## Word-for-word record 2: How do the students respond?

Use concurrently with **Word-for-word record 1: What questions does the teacher ask?** This form may be completed by one or more observers, depending on your team’s focus and needs.

**Date of lesson:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Teacher:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Classroom:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Each time the teacher asks a question, record the time and exactly what the students say in response.

 <b>TIME OF TEACHER'S QUESTION</b>	 <b>STUDENTS' RESPONSE(S) TO THE QUESTION</b>

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### BUSINESS OFFICE

504 S. Locust St.

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800-727-7288

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We are delighted to have been invited by *Education Week* to pursue this collaboration and view this as an opportunity to exchange ideas with important members of our profession. Through this opportunity, we can influence and be influenced by others who may not have professional learning as the singular focus of their work.

Please help us improve the value of our blog by reading our postings and offering your input by commenting.

As we strive to highlight important topics, raise concerns, inspire debate, and motivate action, tell us what you want us to address, and let us know when we fail to achieve our goal.

— Stephanie Hirsh  
[stephanie.hirsh@learningforward.org](mailto:stephanie.hirsh@learningforward.org)