

A transformative professional learning journey of a teacher through lesson study

A practice insight working paper by Laura Formosa and James Calleja

For Laura, being a teacher for the past twelve years and teaching students in a primary school has been a very rewarding and fulfilling experience. Seeing students' smiling, happy faces daily, eagerly wanting to learn and experience new things, makes her appreciate and reflect on her role as a teacher and the potential impact she has on her students' lives. As an Art teacher, young students look up to her as their inspiration to get creative; the teacher who motivates them and encourages them to develop their artistic skills; and the teacher who seeks to offer stimulating learning opportunities.

The school context

Students' expectations as well as the school context in which Laura teaches, bring with them a myriad of challenges and opportunities that she encounters on a daily basis. Whereas primary school teachers usually form part of a team of teachers within the same grade level, Laura is the only primary school Art teacher in her College. Moreover, due to a rigorous and restrictive timetable, it is very unlikely for her to participate in professional development opportunities or collaborative practices with other Art teachers. Indeed, for Laura, lesson planning and preparations are done in

isolation. Although there is robust research evidence that advocates the importance of having teacher educators and teachers working together within professional learning communities to bring about change and improvement in teaching and learning (Vescio et al., 2008; Brown & Zhang, 2017), Laura always feels that she is at a disadvantage and lacks opportunities of forming part of such a professional learning community. Hence, when she was approached to take part in a lesson study, she did not think twice. Laura took the decision with the intention and commitment to form part of a learning network which could provide her with the possibility to work collaboratively with others and to improve her teaching along the way.

The lesson study initiative

Lesson study is an ongoing professional learning model widely used in Japan and often attributed as an important approach for the improvement of teaching (Huang, Takahashi & da Ponte, 2019). In a lesson study teachers work together and engage in ongoing cycles to study, plan, teach and observe, and evaluate a research lesson. This ongoing lesson study process involves a number of crucial steps, namely: (1) selecting what to



teach, which class to teach and when to teach; (2) identifying the learning goals of the lesson; (3) engaging in research and a study of teaching materials; (4) planning the lesson; (5) involving knowledgeable others acting as critical friends; (6) teaching and observing the lesson; and (7) doing a post-lesson discussion to get feedback from observers and other knowledgeable others.

In Malta, lesson study was first introduced with a group of mathematics teachers in 2017. Since then, Collaborative Lesson Study Malta (CLeStuM – www.clestum.eu) was set up. The idea behind this project is to support schools to learn about, initiate and sustain collaborative lesson studies. James, the second author and the CLeStuM team leader, approached Laura with the idea of doing a lesson study. In this lesson study, James supported Laura to enable and assist her with the lesson study process. Knowledgeable others were involved to provide feedback, at the planning stage and following the teaching of the lesson. The Art lesson study was planned for a group of 12 boys in Grade 4 (aged 8 years) and focused on students' understanding of the concepts of foreground, middle ground and background and their application in an art work. We sought to provide students with opportunities to observe, think critically and discuss how foreground, middle ground and background are used in images. Students also

experimented and applied these concepts while creating their own collage artwork.

The lesson study process, challenges and tensions

Laura was aware that the lesson study would be a rigorous process and that challenges would be encountered. She was concerned that her timetable was too restricted, giving her no time to meet, discuss and plan with the lesson study facilitator. She was also preoccupied that she is the only Art teacher in her school, and so has no other teacher with whom she could plan or share ideas about the lesson. Considering that, in other circumstances, a lesson study would involve a group of three or more teachers, in Laura's case some modifications had to be made. The ongoing lesson study process required time, commitment and dedication. Indeed, face-to-face meetings were held after school hours and several online conversations were also held between Laura and James. The focus of the lesson study, which class to teach and when the lesson study would be held, were identified. Research and an in-depth study of what teaching materials and resources could be used to address the lesson objectives followed.

Conversations were not only based on asking for help or sharing materials and strategies but involved joint work. Through joint work, 'the degree of interdependence' between



Laura and James was evident (Van Gasse et al., 2017). To enlarge the community of professionals working together in this initiative, an Art education expert was also invited to give his support and professional feedback during the lesson planning stage and post-lesson trials. During these post-lesson discussions, other knowledgeable others were also invited to share their insights on what they observed during the lesson with a particular focus on student learning.

The lesson study process brought with it instances where Laura felt disheartened and disappointed, and she experienced internal conflicts and frustrations. During the planning phase, she was convinced that the activities that she and James had been working on were the 'best' choice available to address the lesson objectives and to reach the desired student outcomes. As a facilitator, James challenged Laura's thinking about her existing practices. When James proposed alternatives to the lesson plan, replacing the close-ended questions and tasks with more open-ended ones, Laura felt stuck. She perceived this change and the proposed questioning techniques as an unattainable challenge for her students, particularly in grasping the art concepts inherent within the suggested tasks. Based on her existing knowledge of the students, Laura was convinced that students would give up. Since she teaches mixed-ability students, Laura tends to use more guided instructional strategies, where she offers

constant support to those who struggle to understand new concepts or find difficulty learning. For this reason, she tends to rely more on asking closed and direct questions. The use of more open questions and tasks implied that Laura needed to rethink and change her lesson planning approach but also her way of doing things in class. To address this, she needed to step back, reflect and deconstruct her own teaching practices. For Laura, the facilitator was asking her to move away from her comfort zone and to reconsider her decisions, teaching strategies and practices.

A transformative professional learning journey

Throughout the lesson study process, Laura found herself engaged in continuous, deep reflections on her role in the classroom, about herself as a teacher, the way she plans and structures her lessons and the reasons why she adopts certain classroom practices. The frustrations and concerns that Laura encountered, along her lesson study journey, were necessary for her to take a leap forward and start taking risks. This experience has helped her move out of her comfort zone, and to research and test out 'new' instructional strategies for her Art lessons. With support from her knowledgeable others, Laura was willing to try out different techniques of grouping students and assigning more open-



ended tasks. Her experience in this lesson study also helped her believe more in her students' capabilities. She has become more aware that her sense of care and overprotectiveness over her students were influencing, and restricting her planning strategies and her approach in class. Her ongoing reflections and discussions with the lesson study facilitator enabled Laura to understand her existing practices of over guiding and coaching students. Following this lesson study experience, she is now more willing to take risks, set higher cognitive challenges for her students, ready to challenge student thinking, to allow them to think critically, and to use more collaborative work. Indeed, from what she has observed in both lesson trials, the students (even those who usually struggle to learn the more complex concepts) managed to grasp, understand, discuss and apply successfully the new concepts learned, through their art work. When looking back at the whole process, Laura sees herself as transformed and acknowledges that this lesson study served as a professional learning experience for her. She has experienced the notion of learning and working collaboratively within a team of professionals who were willing to share their insights and feedback with her with the aim of challenging her thinking while also offering continuous support. This was possible because the whole lesson study experience was built around trust, mutual respect and a

safe and supportive learning environment. The negotiation of her existing knowledge coupled with ideas from those involved in this lesson study served as an example of how high-quality lessons can be developed. While Laura was humble enough to see herself as a life-long learner, she has learned to adapt herself and her practices, to evolve and challenge her deep-rooted thinking habits, and to be ready to challenge, inquire, examine and reflect on herself and her teaching practices. For the first time, Laura was ready and confident to open her classroom door for observers. The learning emanating from this experience has led Laura to seek collaborations with other teachers and staff members with a disposition towards professional learning. For Laura, those with a passion for teaching and learning should consider engaging in models of professional learning such as lesson study as this was for her a transformative professional learning journey that rendered endless benefits.

Final comments

Through lesson study, learning for Laura was co-created with the support of knowledgeable others. A key aspect contributing to this were the collegial relationship and the mutual support that were cultivated and sustained through the lesson study process. The lesson study process, thus, enabled Laura to create knowledge about teaching that evidently led



to change. Using the classification of professional development models offered by Kennedy (2014), we find that this lesson study enabled teacher autonomy and transformative practice. For the teacher, this professional learning journey brought with it concerns, tensions and frustrations. Indeed, an important aspect of this lesson study was

the opportunities it provided for Laura to ponder pedagogical challenges and their potential solutions through an ongoing process of negotiation, reflection, knowledge sharing and development. Lesson study had this potential on Laura; it has transformed her ways of seeing and acting as a teacher and as a life-long learner.

References

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