

Preface: Historical and Cultural Perspectives on Lesson Study in Japan and China



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Lesson study offers a powerful set of lenses that can sharpen our gaze on teaching. It invites the teachers engaged in conducting a research lesson, observers of the lesson, or even those studying lesson study as a practice to consider small moments and movements in a single lesson and fine details of teaching with the goal of understanding and improving teaching and learning. Yet anyone engaged in lesson study would remind us that it is not only a lens that magnifies the current moment, the act of teaching, but lesson study also gains its power from its ability to focus the educator on connections between the present and future. By considering goals for learning in guiding a lesson plan, looking closely at the enactment of that plan in an instance of teaching, and revising and reflecting on the plan's effect, teachers and others engaged in the practice of lesson study move between big ideas and micro-moments. Lesson study thus naturally weaves back and forth from future to present back to future.

The chapters in this section on “historical and cultural perspectives in Japan and China” offer a reminder that lesson study is neither solely determined by the present moment nor some future goal. Instead, its practice is shaped by traditions constructed over time and in particular contexts. These chapters, considered together, argue for the need to understand lesson study in context, both temporal and spatial. Cultural history and curricular developments and policies toward teachers are dynamic; each affects how lesson study is enacted, what role it plays, and, more profoundly, how teaching is defined. Lesson study also affects teachers differently at different stages of their careers. Whether in terms of an educational system's history or the biography of a single teacher, time and timing are relevant to lesson study. This section demonstrates the value of a historical perspective for understanding what lesson study is and what it achieves (and what its limits are) at

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any one point in time. In addition, lesson study is inherently a social practice. It connects teachers as they plan together and as they observe, discuss, reflect on, and refine a lesson. These chapters show how, depending on the version of lesson study in play, it may bring together a small group of teachers from a single school or link educators across schools, a district, or even nationally or internationally.

The research presented in this section provides insights into lesson study practices in Japan and China. The chapters remind us of the broad range of practices that fall under the umbrella of the term “lesson study,” as well as the need to think more precisely about what that term means at any one moment in time and in any one locale. The four essays outline details about the development and practice of lesson study in Japan and China. There are clear similarities: focusing on “unit” of a lesson as the means of improvement of teaching, relying on making teaching public and open to shared reflection as a way to bring new insights and deeper understandings, invoking, in different contexts, opportunities to model exemplars or chances for critique during the process of exploring and polishing new approaches, developing artifacts and resources for a community of practice and its shared knowledge base, and serving as a means to implement curriculum reform. Yet there are subtle differences worth exploring: to what extent is the focus on the lesson or on student learning? How much is lesson study used to enact reform or to shape it? How is “jointness” defined and collaboration enacted and with what purposes? Each chapter offers us a window on some of these. By considering the essays together, we are left with a richer and more complex understanding of the range of practices, over time and place, that we call lesson study.

Clearly, lesson study has a long history. Today, it is a practice gaining popularity around the world, acting as a kind of “traveling policy” (Thompson 2013) endorsed by educational reformers in many countries.¹ Often, literature refers to “Japanese lesson study” and treats this practice as originating in Japan. Intriguingly, as Naomichi Makinae (this volume) makes clear, the roots of lesson study themselves reflect the ongoing history of movement of ideas about education across national boundaries, in particular between Japan and the West. Indeed, Makinae argues, lesson study was developed to respond to the need to help teachers develop reform-minded practices informed by Pestalozzian and other ideas about teaching imported from afar; it served as a mechanism to spread a type of teaching. Chapters here by both Makinae and Li provide information about how the development of lesson study in Japan and China, at different moments, has been sparked by outside reforms. In both countries, lesson study has a long history and has gone through different periods as some elements of its form and goals have shifted. These accounts persuade us to be wary of treating lesson study as a monolithic or single practice, even within one country’s tradition. And today, as the attention to lesson study has grown internationally, there is even greater value in recognizing the ways in which lesson study creates a dialogue not only among practitioners (as they plan, observe,

¹The creation and growth of the World Association of Lesson Studies and its journal (the *International Journal for Lesson and Learning Studies*) reflect this rapid global reach.

and reflect on a lesson) but among its proponents, advocates, and scholars. Global interest in lesson study has created an international dialogue, not only about how to develop lesson study in a school or district but also about how to support teaching, teachers, curriculum reform, and student learning.

The focus on history also points to the powerful ways cultural assumptions about teaching and learning shape the goals and enactment of lesson study. Traditions of teaching that recognize the power of models allow lesson study practices to hue toward that purpose. Traditions that see teaching as a collective practice afford a community engagement in lesson study that is quite different from lesson study development in contexts in which teaching has traditionally been highly individualized practice (Fernandez 2002). China's lengthy history of teaching research groups (Paine and Ma 1993; Huang et al. this volume) and the cultural roots of Chinese lesson study (Chen 2017) mean that ideas and assumptions, as well as an infrastructure, have long been in place to support the particular embodiments of lesson study—varied as they are—that are present in China today. Li (this volume) and Chen (2017, p. 284) point to the importance, for example, of an epistemology that sees the “unity of knowing and doing,” a pragmatic valuing of learning from concrete experience, and the importance of emulating models. These elements nurture approaches to working in and learning through lesson study that uniquely informs the development of the practice and its evolution in China. As Huang et al. (this volume) suggest, envisioning lesson study in other settings requires that we consider the cultural resources of that context: “when adapting the Chinese LS into other educational systems, the cultural value and professional development system should be given careful consideration.” While the particular cultural resources drawn in Japan's lesson study practices are not identical to these in China, both contexts remind us of the need to recognize culture as a resource and to acknowledge that, despite the spread of lesson study, such resources do not automatically accompany the traveling practice/policy. Instead, these chapters might invite readers to reflect on what aspects of local culture can be exploited to support hybrid practices that combine imported ideas and local resources.

Lesson study advocates are quick to point to its power to support growth over time—for an individual teacher, a group of teachers, as well as for a system (Lewis and Tsuchida 1998). There is strong evidence in both Japan and China for the ways lesson study has allowed teachers to develop as more accomplished educators. In some Chinese settings, for example, teachers working collaboratively to plan and observe lessons are at the core of the induction of new teachers (Paine et al. 2003). As such, lesson study can be a form of socialization into a community of practice. Huang et al.'s (this volume) detailed analysis of one series of lesson study activities of a teacher group reveals how an array of educators, in the school and the district, support not only the improvement of a lesson but also the development of a teacher with stronger understandings of teaching, deeper content knowledge, and new insight about pedagogy. Lesson study thus can help develop teaching and, as several of these chapters argue, can assist teachers in making their teaching to be consistent with new curriculum. The lesson study systems in Japan and China historically have supported larger system-level reform efforts.

As much as lesson study helps form teachers in both countries, however, Watanabe (this volume) also raises the question of how lesson study can shape broader discourses of teaching. That is, the flow of information through lesson study is not necessarily from center or expert to others. It can, as Watanabe's analysis of artifacts of Japanese mathematics lesson study suggests, provide a feedback mechanism from frontline teachers to curriculum decision-makers. Globally, there is a long-standing challenge in creating responsive teaching systems informed by the wisdom of practice of experienced teachers. Lesson study may offer a distinctive, promising means for that sharing of information.

Perhaps one of the rich contributions of lesson study is the ways in which it supports movement within an individual, a community of teachers, and—in the most ambitious possibilities (as Watanabe outlines)—a large educational system. The meticulous tracking of iterations of changes of a lesson, and the actors engaged in that process, in one mathematics lesson study project (Huang et al. this volume) points to the ways lesson study offers wide-ranging participation with the possibility of rounds of learning across time and space/location/actors.

The set of chapters invite questioning about the complexity of the relationships inherent in lesson study, and how relationships that are hierarchical or position some teachers as learning from (other) experts afford learning that is similar and different from lesson study conceived as fundamentally collaborative, with teacher learning from and through joint work. Each offers possibilities, but not the same. Intriguingly, the experience over decades in both China and Japan offer examples of variation, within a country, in how relationships in lesson study are assumed to serve teacher learning. Similarly, these chapters remind us of a dilemma of lesson study's role in reinforcing and reproducing dominant traditions and its potential as an incubator of innovative challenges to status quo teaching. How elements of cultural tradition inform how educators view the role(s) of lesson study, the engagement of participants, and the ultimate goals of the practice appear pivotal.

Finally, these chapters do not only help us recognize the complexity of lesson study and call us to avoid treating it as some known or uniform practice, but they also model the rich variation possible in approaches to studying it—from historical analysis of documents and careful tracing of artifacts in relation to discourses (of textbooks, policy, and so on) to observation, interview, and video analysis of the process itself. As we seek to unpack a practice as diverse and rich as lesson study, our questions deserve equally rich forms of inquiry.

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