

Knowledgeable Others: What are your roles and how do you become more effective?

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Lesson study is a teacher-centered and teacher-driven professional development practice. However, in many successful lesson study groups, both in Japan and in the United States, non-classroom teachers also play important roles. Some of these people work closely with lesson study groups as they plan their research lessons, and some of them also provide the closing comments at the post-lesson discussion session. In Japan, these people are often called “outside advisors,” (Fernandez & Yoshida, 2004) but in the United States, they have become known as “knowledgeable others.”

However, in part because lesson study is a new professional development practice in the United States, many US lesson study groups are supported by non-classroom teachers who provide technical assistance. Those people assume many roles that are often carried out by classroom teachers (or lesson study promotion committees composed of classroom teachers) in Japan, but they also play roles that are unique to the United States, such as obtaining funding support for substitutes. Over time, those people have also become known as knowledgeable others.

As our understanding of lesson study grows, however, questions are being raised about the roles these “knowledgeable others” play. For example, one reason “outside advisors” are important in lesson study is because they bring in fresh (outside) perspectives. However, if the same person works very closely with the study group prior to the research lesson, can s/he really bring a fresh perspective? Moreover, lesson study is supposed to be a practice where all participants truly collaborate as equals. What, then, should be an appropriate relationship between a knowledgeable other and lesson study group members? How is a knowledgeable other different from someone like an instructional coach?

Because there seem to be several types of non-classroom teacher members of lesson study groups in the United States, I propose that we use the phrase, “knowledgeable others,” to describe all non-teacher members of lesson study groups whose main purpose is to support teacher learning.

There are at least three types of “knowledgeable others.” They are

- facilitators
- moderators of post-lesson discussions
- outside advisors

In our session during the symposium, we focused our attention on “outside advisors,” not because the others were unimportant but because “outside advisors” were unique to lesson study and not much had been written about their roles, either in Japan or in the United States. One of our goals was to discuss how we might improve our practice as “outside advisors.”

As we think about how to be effective “outside advisors,” it is helpful to think about the primary roles of “outside advisors,” as well as what teacher-practitioners of lesson study might look for in “outside advisors.” According to Fernandez, Yoshida, Chokshi & Cannon (2001), “outside advisors” serve the following three purposes:

- (1) to provide a different perspective when reacting to the lesson study work of the group
- (2) to provide information about math content, new ideas, or reforms
- (3) to share the work of other lesson study groups

Thus, our efforts to improve as “outside advisors” should focus on becoming more effective in these three areas.

One US teacher provided the following list when she was asked to identify the characteristics of effective “outside advisors”:

1. knowledge of the content
2. experience with lesson study
3. ability to convey a sense of collegiality in working toward a common goal
4. generosity in sharing expertise, experiences, and a larger perspective
5. respect for teachers and students as learners--for what each person brings to the process
6. sense of humor and warmth.

The following is a list of suggested activities the session participants identified, keeping these purposes and essential traits of effective “outside advisors” in mind.

- Deepen our own content knowledge and how students learn the content.
- Learn how to phrase our comments in a manner that will not put anyone on the defensive.
- Develop a disposition to think about the general/broader issues – not focusing on one particular lesson but what the study lesson might inform our on-going efforts to improve teaching.
- Participate in as many lesson study open houses as possible, observing other “outside advisors” in action.
- Teach lessons ourselves.
- Communicate and exchange ideas with others who serve as “outside advisors.”

Although classroom teachers are the main players in lesson study, all knowledgeable others play important supporting roles in improving the quality of lesson study. However, just as teachers must continuously work on improving their craft of teaching, knowledgeable others must also strive to improve their crafts. Just as teachers can learn so much from their own students, knowledgeable others can learn from teacher practitioners of lesson study (and students). Perhaps such a “learning stance” is the most important characteristic of an effective knowledgeable other.

References:

Fernandez, C., & Yoshida, M. (2004). *Lesson study: A Japanese approach to improving mathematics teaching and learning*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Fernandez, C., Yoshida, M., Chokshi, S., & Cannon, J. (2001). An overview of lesson study. Lesson Study Research Group. Retrieved May 27, 2005, from http://www.teacherscollege.edu/lessonstudy/presentations_slides.html.