Lesson Study as a Form of Action Research for Instructional Leaders

Action research is a form of disciplined inquiry used to investigate a problem or question of personal interest where there is no satisfactory present answer. It is a cyclical process in which educators use primary resources and real-world information and data to inform new courses of action (Johnson, 2001). From a motivational perspective, it helps educators know that their questions and perspectives matter and pursue investigations that are of authentic concern (Ginsberg, 2011).

Action research can also be a powerful tool to strengthen instructional leadership in a school district. For example, the Japanese “lesson study” method through which educators investigate an instructional concern by designing a lesson together, watching a colleague teach the lesson, and then reflecting on ways to improve upon the lesson can also help administrators plan engaging staff meetings.

The school district featured in this article developed a modified lesson study cycle for principals to engage. The process revolved around the action research question of “How can we, as administrators, apply research on adult learning to staff meetings so that we are creating for teachers, the same learning conditions they seek to create for students?” The research experience we developed included concrete tools for principals to design a motivating staff meeting, implement an observation schedule to watch each others’ staff meetings, and rubrics and reflection tools to explore ways to improve upon principals’ modeling of motivating adult learning.

After principals agreed on a research question, they identified how to collect and analyze data. The research question, which was “How can we, as administrators, apply research on adult
learning to staff meetings so that we are creating for teachers the same learning conditions they seek to create for students?” led to the principals’ decision to collect data by taking notes based on instructional “look-fors” while observing one another. They analyzed their instructional notes and personal reflections (data) on the process by identifying and discussing common themes.

**The Challenge for Principals and Teachers**

As building leaders it is often a challenge to keep “the first things first,” namely maintaining a focus on improving instruction in order to improve student learning. It is easy to get distracted by the daily grind and to be pulled in every other direction. However, when a clear focus on instruction is absent, the result may be that teachers, too, lose their focus on improving instruction. When principals in the Lake Stevens School District found themselves in just this position, they decided to use Lesson Study (Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006) as a vehicle to refocus their own attention on powerful instruction. Lesson Study is a practice where educators (1) plan a lesson together, (2) observe as one of the educators teaches the lesson, (3) collectively reflect on the lesson to refine it, and then (4) another member of the team re-teaches the refined lesson in a different classroom – or, in this case, staff meeting. In the process of modeling powerful instruction, they also modeled the professional learning practice of Lesson Study for their teachers, and invited teachers to make a commitment to action around improving their instruction, and action around learning from one another through Lesson Study.

What follows is a description of the action research project we designed to answer the following two questions: *How might the Lesson Study process help secondary principals and teachers refocus on improving instruction?* And, *as a result of modeling the use of Lesson Study, to what extent will teachers commit to Lesson Study as a vehicle to collaborate on improving instruction?*
The Context for Our Inquiry

It was mid-year and administrators were gathered at a monthly Secondary Administrative Team meeting. The discussion had landed on a common concern: we all seemed to have lost our administrative focus on improving instruction. We were a team of eleven principals and associate principals in the Lake Stevens School District. We represented two 6-7 middle schools, an 8-9 mid high school, and a comprehensive 10-12 high school. At the time one of the authors (John) was principal of the three-year-old Cavelero Mid High School.

Some years ago, the district had committed to an instructional framework known as Powerful Teaching and Learning (BERC Group, 2009a). It provided a way to define good instruction and student learning. Lake Stevens had invested time and effort on professional development, visiting and observing classrooms, and collaboratively engaging in discussions about our practice. However, administrators agreed that in the past year and a half or so we had allowed the daily operational and managerial minutiae to occupy the majority of our time. We did not feel like we were being instructional leaders who prioritized strengthening instructional practice as a central part of our work.

There were two main frustrations we shared. The first frustration was that we had lost our own focus on being instructional leaders through our instructional framework. The Powerful Teaching and Learning (PTL) Framework is centered on the STAR Protocol (BERC Group, 2009b). STAR is an acronym for the four domains of Skills and Knowledge, Thinking, Application, and Relationships. While PTL and STAR had been implemented with varying degrees of success across the district we agreed that they had the potential to provide a language, structure, and framework that was commonly understood by all educators. Unfortunately, without our strong leadership they had slipped from the forefront of our work.
The second frustration was that for years we had talked about creating a “culture of collaborative practice” in our buildings, but again we had failed to create the conditions that made this a regular part of our way of doing business. A component of PTL expected that teachers observe one another and collect evidence regarding the four teaching and learning domains using a STAR protocol observation tool. Failing to maintain focus on PTL, we had unwittingly eliminated an opportunity for our teachers to engage in collaborative professional growth.

**Our Theory of Action**

How could we possibly refocus our own leadership practice on improved instructional practice while doing the same for our teachers? I suggested that we might consider something called “Lesson Study” that I had been learning about with colleague Margery Ginsberg, who was a professor in the Leadership for Learning Program at the University of Washington Seattle. Our theory of action (rationale) was that if we could introduce teachers to the Lesson Study process, creating PTL lessons, we could address our concerns of both improved instruction and the collaborative process. Lesson Study could be the vehicle to get us back on track.

Although my fellow administrators were not familiar with the practice of Lesson Study, they liked the idea that we would learn about it together, demonstrate it as part of our renewed commitment to instruction, and explicitly teach it to our teachers. We decided to collaboratively design a “lesson” to be taught at a faculty meeting. In this case the lesson would be an adult learning experience focused on the domains of the STAR instructional framework, and we would model powerful teaching and learning as evidenced by STAR.

With more discussion, we determined three specific reasons for doing a full Lesson Study cycle. By engaging in the process we would:
Construct a learning experience that could allow us to gain perspective of the value of Lesson Study. We would be able to decide for ourselves if Lesson Study provided a valuable process worth pursuing in our buildings.

Teach a strategy to our teachers by modeling two layers of learning for teachers. Not only would we model the Lesson Study cycle to our teachers, but we would also be intentional about designing our lesson using the very domains of the PTL framework that we wanted to reinforce with our teachers. Teachers would learn about lesson study while also being reminded of PTL.

Encourage teachers to take action to improve their instruction by committing to focus on at least one domain of the STAR protocol or perhaps even engage in a Lesson Study cycle with some colleagues.

The Action Research Plan

I offered to begin the process by teaching the lesson to my staff. The rest of the administrative team agreed to observe, collect observation data, and provide feedback during our debriefing time. We met a week after our original meeting for about an hour to plan our lesson. As discussed, we wanted to model the very principles we intended to remind teachers of. Therefore, we were intentional about using a PTL lesson-planning tool to include activities and strategies addressing each of the four domains. I would teach the lesson while being observed by the other administrators. Following the lesson, feedback would be shared and suggestions made to improve the lesson. Another principal would take this information, make adjustments to tailor the lesson to his staff and then teach the lesson at his own faculty meeting. The rest of us would observe and provide feedback, completing the cycle.
In general, our lesson would begin by engaging teachers in a reflection about what constitutes powerful instruction. We would ask staff to observe a short video clip and simply take note of effective instructional practices they observed. Next, we would facilitate the discussion and map their observations onto the STAR protocol observation tool. In this way I, the teacher of the lesson, would not simply dictate the specifics of the STAR protocol but rather would help staff to identify what they already knew to be good instruction and locate their observations within the appropriate domain. They would actively apply skills and knowledge and use higher order thinking skills, the first two domains of STAR.

Next we would ask teachers to reflect on their own practice by thinking about which domains of STAR they effectively employ or they might like to get better at. This was the “A” of STAR—application. Throughout the adult learning experience we planned to employ strategies that could be effective in a classroom with secondary students. We worked to build relationships, the “R” in STAR, such as working in table groups, talking to an elbow partner, and a familiar opening task involving positive note cards sent home to students. We would intentionally call out the PTL principles in our lesson.

Learning from the Experiences

There were two types of evidence we agreed to collect to determine if we had accomplished our goals. First, as a regular part of the Lesson Study process, members of the administrative team would observe the lesson, take notes, and provide feedback during a debriefing session following the lesson. Since we were using the PTL framework, the STAR protocol observation tool provided the perfect tool. This feedback allowed us to make adjustments to the lesson, improving upon it so that the next time it was taught, it would be
better. The quality of the feedback and the process of evolving the lesson helped us to determine the value of lesson study.

The second piece of evidence would involve a commitment to action by our adult learners, that is, our staff. At the conclusion of the lesson, we would ask each member of the staff who is a classroom teacher to complete a Commitment to Action form. The form provided teachers three choices: (1) participate in a full Lesson Study cycle with a group of peers, (2) participate in a PTL classroom observation using the STAR protocol, or (3) commit to intentionally designing a lesson with a focus on at least one identified element of good instruction. Two choices required a larger commitment by both teachers and principals and principals agreed to commit building funds to allow planning and classroom observation. The third choice required a less demanding commitment, without compromising our commitment to a renewed focus on instruction.

**Moving the Plan Forward**

I conducted the lesson at my first faculty meeting the next month. All secondary administrators were able to attend and observe. This required administrators to leave their buildings and contributed to the need for a clear and compelling rationale. I used this as an opportunity to practice how to communicate the Lesson Study process to busy administrators with demanding responsibilities. To eventually communicate the potential of this kind of administrative teamwork to other colleagues and constituents, two different video cameras recorded the lesson for possible future use as a teaching tool.

The lesson went very well. Staff were engaged and involved, and we were able to collect our evidence. Immediately following the lesson, we met, shared feedback, and discussed improvements to the lesson. The plan was to have the high school principal then teach the new
and improved lesson to his staff the following week. However, I had the unique opportunity to re-teach the lesson at my make-up faculty meeting the following morning. When the high school principal taught the lesson to the staff, the rest of our admin team again observed and provided feedback. We were able to complete the Lesson Study cycle by debriefing at the end.

**What We Learned -- Our Action Research Results**

Actually experiencing the Lesson Study cycle with the secondary administrative team was one of the best things I could have done before introducing the concept to my staff. The process of collaboratively planning a “lesson” to present to our teachers forced us to focus on what we mean when we talk about powerful instruction. While I am usually able to plan faculty meetings with my two associate principals, to have the entire secondary administrative team participate in the planning provided an entirely different set of perspectives and ideas. For example, when other principals made comments about certain challenges of addressing their own teachers, I was reminded of the need to differentiate for my own staff. One colleague pointed out my tendency to overlook the thinking component of the STAR. As a result, we were intentional about building time for this into our lesson. Such insights were invaluable in designing a great lesson that worked with my staff. Further, debriefing the lesson provided an excellent source of formal feedback enabling us to improve the lesson.

Now, when I talk with staff about Lesson Study I can do so from the perspective of experience: I have done it myself. Actually participating in a Lesson Study cycle also allowed me to take a risk in front of my staff and demonstrate that I am not asking them to do anything that I wouldn’t do myself. Again, I can now speak from experience of the value of this practice. I believe this kind of leadership earns respect and builds trust. Two years later, at an executive staff meeting, the high school principal, who is now our associate superintendent of human
resources, also taught the debriefed and revamped lesson to his staff and mentioned that he found his experience to be of particular value.

In terms of teachers taking action as a result of the lesson we provided, it could not have been more encouraging. Thirty of my 65 teachers committed to engaging in a Lesson Study cycle before the end of the year. This was a pleasant surprise and I wanted to make the experience as valuable for them as it was for our entire admin team. It was important to provide them with all the background information, tools, and structures to enable them to successfully complete a cycle.

To support their commitment to engage in their own Lesson Study experiences, I compiled a Lesson Study Binder for each team. It included a statement explaining Lesson Study, an article from Phi Delta Kappan entitled “Lesson Study Comes of Age in North America” (Lewis et al., 2006), a collection of tools such as the PTL lesson planning tool with guiding questions, teacher personal reflection form, STAR protocol observation tool, “Wows and Wonders” Reflection tool, and finally, a tool to be used to reflect on and assess the Lesson Study process. These tools guided teams of teachers successfully through a complete Lesson Study cycle.

In one sense, it was easier for the administrative team to engage in a Lesson Study cycle than for our teachers. Our “lessons” were taught outside the regular school day and all observers were able to attend without missing their own workday. Teachers, on the other hand, would have to miss class in order to observe. This required support from principals in the form of financial commitment for the cost of class coverage. And of course, teaching one lesson per month at a faculty meeting allows much more time to prepare. Nonetheless, administrators and teachers worked together to marshal resources and create a schedule for teachers to experiment with their
own versions of Lesson Study. We are currently in the process of collecting data to examine the teachers’ experiences with Lesson Study.

**Concluding Comments**

As we close, we would like to briefly mention something important that we’ve learned from research and experience about the process of change. Whether it’s trying new learning activities, designing lessons, or rethinking old approaches, none of us can ever know beforehand, with certainty, what the consequences of our actions will be. The action research experience in this article was an example of how leaders who seek to innovate professional learning through practices such as Lesson Study depend at least as much on imagination and faith as they do on planning and prediction. During such times, educators at all levels of a system need opportunities to learn with and from each other over time and on a sustained basis. Armed with evidence of teacher willingness to experiment and, at times, outright enthusiasm about new ways to access each others’ knowledge, there will be fears and hesitations as well as interruptions in schedules.

Although there are a number of pre-packaged approaches to improving instruction, using Lesson Study as a form of action research that is customized to local needs and contexts serves a distinct purpose. It reminds educators that local knowledge can be mined to continuously and effectively improve instruction. Just as important, it creates significant human bonds for continued learning. That was certainly the case with the team of administrators who demonstrated the process to their staff. In finding and demonstrating motivating ways for teachers to collaborate on instructional improvement, administrative leaders developed an understanding of how to support one another as instructional leaders and co-learners committed to each other’s success.


