

Creating Mental Representations

**Lesson Study in a
Primary Classroom**

**Descriptions of
Lesson Study Phases**

**Carmen Karen Galea Mizzi
Michelle Buhaiar**

Lesson Study Phases

Phase 1: Select group of teachers

The group of teachers working on this lesson study are the author (a peripatetic art teacher in primary schools), and a Year 3 class teacher. The main reason we developed this team was a practical one, since we are both teachers within the Gozo College and we happen to both share a common school. This element of the process was, in particular, difficult for me as a peripatetic teacher who visits various schools so I had to find a way to work on a lesson study despite this situation.

According to Stepanek et al. (Stepanek, 2007), one of the four main ingredients to successful lesson studies is that participating teachers are willing and engaged. Therefore, it was a natural solution for us to form a group together for this project, as we both were motivated and interested in creating and experiencing this learning process. In addition, I know the Year 3 teacher well so we both felt comfortable working together, which is also essential in creating the type of reflective and analytical dialogue needed to learn from each other through lesson study.

A member of the SMT, who is in charge of the Year 3 year-group, was also involved. We felt the need to include another member from the school that understood the particular year group we would be working with and could enhance the learning experience for us. In addition, hopefully through the inclusion of a member of the SMT, the experience and professional development that the lesson study offers can be shared with others.

Phase 2: The initial meeting – how did you conduct this?

The first meeting we held was an informal one between myself and the Year 3 teacher since finding time to meet proved to be quite difficult. In fact, we found it hard to find a time to meet with the other member of the team – the member of the SMT – and December being a busy time at school did not help, so we decided to meet then inform her later on of what was discussed, etc. From this experience, I feel that when leading such a group, time to meet and plan can be a major concern. It is true that having members of the team that understand the merits of a lesson study can help in giving them the incentive to make it happen, but time in the reality of our primary schools is what it is, so I think you need to find creative ways of going about this. One way we found useful was technology. By using group chats, using shared documents, etc., one could work together virtually. In addition, this helped put the limited time we had to actually meet to good use.

Since we both already understood what lesson study involves, in this meeting we focused mainly on what we would be teaching and the logistics concerned. We discussed what areas the pupils concerned seemed to need more assistance in and tried to find a way to include art, as my subject speciality, so as to create a cross-curricular approach. It was settled that we would focus on reading comprehension in English as the main focus of our lesson. We also looked at the Learning Outcome Frameworks concerning reading comprehension in English and language skills to pinpoint the specific targets for the pupils in this area. Due to time

restrictions, we also decided that the lesson study would cover one lesson plus a follow up lesson, which would be done with another Year 3 class. In addition, we discussed certain logistics with regards to when we could do the lesson in the most practical way for both of us. It was decided that since we were developing a cross-curricular approach, we could do the lesson during what is usually their art lesson time. This was decided so as to make it easier for me to be present without disrupting the school's timetable. The lesson was held in January 2019.

Phase 3: Selecting what to teach, what class to teach and when to teach the lesson

Since our lesson study group includes a Year 3 teacher and a member of the SMT who is in charge of the year 3 group, doing the lessons with Year 3 classes was an obvious choice for various reasons. In addition, the SMT member is also in charge of literacy, which happens to be what the lesson focuses on. It is a class we all work with so we are familiar with the children and their academic development.

The research theme is developed through consideration of the reality of pupils' current state vis-à-vis educational or long-term goals for their learning and development.

(Fuji, 2016).

After considering this with regards to the pupils we will be working with, we decided to focus on improving their knowledge and use of strategies in reading comprehension. After researching the lesson study theme and the various strategies one can use, we chose to focus on visualisation because we felt it provided a good springboard for improving reading comprehension in general as well as a starting point for developing other strategies in reading comprehension for children. It also provides a good opportunity to link with art in a cross-curricular approach since images are the first step in visualisation both in art and in stories vis-a-vis illustrations. I feel that this part of the lesson study is really beneficial personally and collaboratively and when leading a lesson study, it needs to be emphasised and used appropriately. That is, it is important to start with identifying the research theme and then developing your plan based on this and the research ensued. This phase can be a real eye-opener with regards to content knowledge and how pupils can learn or understand better.

The lesson was planned to be taught in the beginning of January. The reason is that we needed the first term to allow the pupils to settle down and to see which prior skills the pupils have already acquired and what or if they needed to build on these more before moving on to visualisation. This is because for a child to be able to visualise while reading, they need to have certain skills to build on. These include reading and language skills, as well as using the senses, emotional awareness and imagination.

Phase 4: Exploring our 'idea' in the lesson study

I felt the need to add this phase to my reflections here, because I feel it is an essential part of the lesson study.

Part of the lesson study involves researching strategies and content to see what can help improve learning for your pupils – exploring your 'idea' in the lesson study. I found this part of the lesson study very enlightening and feel it was a crucial part of what makes lesson study an active way of developing professionally. It provides the teacher with a chance to research pupils' learning in a profound way and this led me to renew and strengthen the idea of the teacher as a researcher and learner. I think that as time passes, a teacher may feel stuck in the routines and cultures. Indeed, I feel that lesson study can be a very important tool in creating changes in education where it counts – in the pupils' learning.

An important aspect in the lesson planning process is predicting the pupils' responses and any difficulties or mistakes they may make. This is something I knew as a teacher but which in reality I did not do regularly. This lesson study offered me the opportunity to see how important this step is in guiding the teacher to improve learning. By anticipating what may happen, the teacher can be better prepared for the situations and may even change or add things to suit the needs better. For me, this is what the lesson study is all about. In fact, we predicted various mistakes the pupils may fall into and so planned ways to help them avoid or overcome these.

Phase 5: The lesson planning process

Preparing a "lesson proposal" – a document that describes the research theme, content goals, connections between the current content and related content from former and later grades, rationale for the chosen approach, a detailed plan for the research lesson, anticipated student thinking, and data collection – was crucial.

From our experience, finding a good time for everyone to be present for the meetings and even finding a good space to meet at school proved to be a big challenge. Again, I believe that if this was a strategy being adopted by the school as a whole it could help this situation a lot. Also, finding creative ways to work around it can help too. As discussed in our online forum, the use of shared documents and other forms of communication can facilitate this issue to some extent by providing opportunities for sharing and discussion and doing other work related to the lesson study so that when you actually do find time to meet you can focus the time on the essential. I feel that such methods of sharing, discussion and reflection are underutilised in teacher's professional development in Malta. This is a shame because they can be very useful and fruitful in my opinion and my experience of them so far. Therefore, this can be food for thought for anyone leading a lesson study or other form of professional development. However, you also definitely need to believe in what you are doing to be able to make the type of effort needed. Hence, this is something a leader of such an initiative needs to consider:

- How can you get teachers to believe in lesson study as a good form of professional development?
- How can it be used to improve learning in your school?
- How can you get teachers to trust enough to open up their doors to others?

These are issues you would need to work on as a leader and which take time. From this experience, I am also coming to appreciate more the positive effects of collaboration, on myself and on the team as a whole. We can learn a lot from each other and this type of development needs to be provided for more in our schools.

Phase 6: Teaching the lesson

The first lesson was delivered to on the 17th of January 2019. My role was that of an observer. The lesson was delivered by the Year 3 teacher. Since it was my first time observing a lesson, I found it a bit difficult to control my teacher instincts and stop myself from intervening or assisting. I was also a bit apprehensive about my abilities to observe the lesson thoroughly with regards to student learning rather than looking at the teaching. This is one crucial lesson I gained through this process – to look at the learning taking place rather than the teaching. As a student teacher and as a teacher, the focus of observations is usually on the teaching being done by the teacher rather than on the learning, and this culture can be hard to shake. The lesson study offers a perfect opportunity to do exactly this and I feel this can be an aspect that can be used to encourage more teachers to open their doors as they see that the focus is not on them and their practice but rather on the learning taking place.

I also had to mentally prepare myself for the role of observer. The process of the lesson study itself helped me in this too as it offered a lot of opportunities to research and reflect on the strategies being taught and the build-up of the lesson itself. I feel this helped a lot when it came to observing the lesson as it provided a sense of ownership in the lesson and greater insight into what we were looking for with regards to improving the pupils' learning. It was an interesting experience to observe the lesson as it gave me an opportunity to view the lesson as a student would. I actually sat on a student's desk to get the same viewpoint that they have during the lesson and so get a better feel of how they see, hear and experience things. I must say, it was a very fruitful experience for me as a teacher as it gets you to reflect more on what you can do to assist learning, how you do it, how you present resources, etc., so as to get the best out of them with regards to student learning. As a peripatetic art teacher, it also got me thinking on how I can use my lessons to further enhance such skills and collaborate more with class teachers.

Phase 7: The lesson study debriefing: What came out of evaluation?

The debriefing phase gives the people in the lesson study team the opportunity to share these observations and scrutinise the learning that took place during the lesson in a way that leads to reflection and improvement in the lesson so that it offers better learning opportunities for all pupils. It is this transformative professional development which is at the heart of the whole exercise.

Our debriefing session was held a day after the lesson so everything was still fresh in our mind and we had some time to go over our notes and reflect on what we had observed. This helped us be better prepared for our debriefing as we all had a clear idea of what we had to share. We first listened to the Year 3 teacher and her viewpoint as the teacher that delivered the lesson. We then went over each phase of the lesson and the member of the SMT and myself shared our observations. We shared the positive points and points where we felt the pupils' learning did not meet our expectations. We had a general consensus on which parts of the lesson went well with regards to student learning and which we felt needed tweaking. We all felt that the visualisation strategy definitely did help in reading comprehension as it greatly improved the comprehension of lower level readers and enhanced the reading experience of the higher-level readers. This could be seen in the 3 case-study pupils which I was observing during the lesson and was reflected by other pupils in their various reading levels. We had evidence of this in the interviews we conducted with some pupils after the lesson and from the feedback given by the pupils in general. So, the choice of strategy we felt was a good one. In fact, the member of the SMT as the 'knowledgeable other' in charge of literacy in the school was very interested in the strategy and commented on how much it helped all readers and how she had never seen it used this way before. This was definitely a positive aspect of the lesson. The scaffolding also seemed to help ease the pupils into using the visualisation strategy and so we felt this should be kept.

The parts we felt needed changing to enhance the pupils' engagement and learning were:

- the second reading of 'Where the Wild Things Are' needed to be improved somehow to enhance the pupils' engagement and attention
- The main worksheet used for the visualisation exercises on 'Where the Wild Things Are' needed fixing so that all pupils – those using the main worksheet and those using the support worksheet could work on the same section of text from the beginning. This would give the support pupils more time to work on theirs and would avoid confusion on the pupils' part.
- We needed to strengthen the *neriage* (plenary) phase of the lesson. This was crucial as this part offered great opportunities for peer learning and consolidating what they had learned, if done well. We felt that the pupils struggled in speaking about and comparing the other pupils' work to their own. Describing their own work and explaining which words from the text they used to visualise was ok but going further than that was difficult for them.

We discussed these aspects further. The different viewpoints helped a lot in this because we all shared from our own experiences and so it was a clear opportunity for learning from each other. The presence of the member of the SMT and her knowledge as a member of the SMT and as the co-ordinator of literacy in the school was also useful here. She shared her expertise with us as well as things she had seen other teachers do which could help us improve these

elements of the lesson so as to enhance the pupils' learning. Here, I came to appreciate more how the presence of a 'knowledgeable other' can further enhance the fruitfulness of a lesson study. I can also appreciate more the ways such sharing and discussion can really lead to improvement in learning and teaching.

Phase 8: Revising and re-teaching the lesson

After the debriefing, we worked on revising the lesson with regards to the needed changes. We decided that the second reading of 'Where the Wild Things Are' needed to be in a different voice to create variety and so hopefully keep pupils engaged more since during the first lesson, some pupils lost focus during the second reading. We discussed ways of achieving this. It had to be a voice only audio recording so that the kids depended on the words to visualise. It had to be male since the teacher delivering the lesson was a female. Preferably, it had to be in an English accent if possible. We decided to find a video recording of someone reading the story on YouTube and just use the sound.

Regarding the worksheet, we decided to swap around the two exercises on the main worksheet so that the text in the first exercise matched the text on the support worksheet. This would make it easier for all the pupils to start working at the same time without confusion.

Finally, we worked on the *neriage* phase. We discussed how the teacher was already trying to support this phase through questioning and this should continue. We decided to stick all the drawings on the board in front of the pupils to make it easier for them to compare and contrast. We hope that this will facilitate the discussion more and so increase the level of peer learning taking place.

The second lesson was delivered to another Year 3 class on 21st January 2019. After this, we discussed the lesson in light of the changes we had made. We all feel that the changes did improve each element and increased engagement and learning. We do still feel that the *neriage* phase needs more working on. However, we all agree that at this age and coming from a culture of schooling that does not give many opportunities for such discussions makes it difficult for the pupils. Therefore, this is something we need to consider further and find ways of improving in our lessons in the future.

The fact that the other Year 3 teacher was willing to let us do a lesson in her class but not willing to form part of our lesson study team, continues to demonstrate to me the wariness our teachers seem to have of new things and opening classroom doors. In the current situation of many rapid changes in our system, I can understand and empathise. However, I am coming to strongly feel that we need to tread more carefully when trying to change practices or ideas as too much in too little time just overwhelms and in my opinion can set things up to fail. People need to fully understand the change and the need for it to fully embrace it. Here continuous professional development plays a crucial part, I think. CPD needs to offer the knowledge, the skills and the support needed for teachers to implement new practices, face change, and improve teaching and learning for all. So again, I feel such initiatives can have better chance at succeeding if they are believed in and endorsed by the SMT and continuous support is offered to facilitate the process.

I feel the whole cycle of lesson study provides many opportunities for a teacher to improve in an active way. It involves a cycle of observing, reflecting and analysing and acting which is repeated until it leads you to change in a way that improves learning for the pupils. The sense of ownership it gives you provides engagement and motivation. It is a demanding task but a very fulfilling one.

Phase 9: Benefits and challenges of integrating lesson study within your school

Challenges:

One of the obvious challenges faced is finding time to meet. In fact, this was one of the challenges many of us anticipated in the beginning during our online forum discussions. I believe that a lot needs to be changed for schools to be better able to provide time for such opportunities, especially in primary where the reality is a bit different from that of middle and secondary schools (although they too find some difficulty here). I have already mentioned and reflected on this issue throughout these reflections. However, I also want to point out that this issue can be very demotivating for teachers which does not help the situation. Traditional school structures and norms often mitigate against the development of learning communities where all staff are committed to continuous learning, and this is the reality we seem to be facing in our schools.

Finding other teachers to participate and be part of the lesson study team can also be a challenge, especially when initially starting such a venture in your school. Again, here, this might pose slightly more of a problem in primary schools since I believe there is more inclination and opportunity in secondary schools for teachers to collaborate especially within their subject groups and with the help of Heads of Department. In primary, things are slightly different and again the 'traditional school structures' can offer obstacles. Like all new practices, it requires a change in the way teachers think about and view professional development as well as a change in mind-set with regards to opening classroom doors and their practices to others. Changing the way teachers view their own learning can be key in helping them understand lesson study and not fear it or see it as an assessment of their own practice but rather of the strategy being used and how best to reach meaningful learning experiences for the pupils.

I see lesson study as something that needs to be endorsed by a school; explained and promoted to allow teachers to truly see what it is; and developed and supported continuously as teachers are trained, given the skills, and supported as they embrace and gradually implement the lesson study themselves. These efforts then need to be celebrated and shared.

Benefits:

I see Lesson study as an active research approach to professional development. It is a learning cycle that instigates collaboration and the observation, analyses and reflection of a theme/strategy and it leads to improvement and/or change. In normal lesson planning, I believe certain key elements would be missed, in particular the research phase – kyozaikenkyu. Lesson study allows you to delve deeper and try to better understand the needs of your pupils as well as the strategies you can use to meet those needs and take learning beyond. It gives you the opportunity to make realisations which before you may have taken for granted but which in reality are key to understanding how pupils learn a particular concept and so how you should be teaching and developing it. In my case, visualisation was always something I took for granted and assumed everyone could do easily. The research we did for this lesson study helped me realise that it is a skill that needs to be trained and developed. Its steps like these offered by lesson study that help a teacher make more informed choices in the strategies and resources used to teach and it is here that professional development takes place.

Lesson study also helps develop communities of learning as it promotes and offers opportunities for teachers to share and learn from each other's experiences and differences. Therefore, it can broaden perspectives and ideas. As one can see, the learning from lesson study is of different types: some learning is 'knowledge' as we often use the term (e.g. knowledge about content and about student thinking); some learning is embodied in the relationships among teachers in a school; and some learning is embodied in individual habits of mind and personal qualities (such as curiosity or scepticism). Lesson study provides the opportunity and environment for this to take place and when these forms of learning interact with each other, they lead to improvement and change for the future.