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COLLABORATIVE STUDY GROUPS FOR WORLD LANGUAGE EDUCATORS

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Collaborative Study Groups for World Language Educators

Synopsis:

The teacher study group (TSG) is a kind of professional learning community in which teachers with similar interests meet regularly to explore and reflect upon selected issues. This presentation examines case studies of two teacher study groups comprised of world language teachers. Using analysis of the two groups, it reports how the TSGs influenced participants' knowledge and practices, as well as their relationships. TSG procedures, advantages, challenges, and suggestions for implementation will also be discussed.

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Research Summary

Introduction

Teacher education has historically focused on the distribution of one-size-fit-all teaching techniques and, to implement these, provided pre-packaged, short-term workshops (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Masuda, 2010; Stanley, 2011; Thompson, Gregg & Niska, 2004). This kind of transmission teacher education didn't succeed, failing to reflect the reality of the day-to-day classrooms and the value and beliefs of individual teachers (Anderson, 2002; Bachmann, 2012; Mansour, 2009; Rust, 2009). Dissatisfaction of traditional teacher education shifted its direction towards transactional professional development (Arnold, 2002; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Guskey, 2000). The transactional model of teacher education views teachers as active participants and the center of their professional development. It focuses on individual teachers' capabilities and needs closely connected to their own classrooms (Bachmann, 2012). A TSG is a

form of transactional teacher education through which a group of educators come together, share knowledge and experiences, and collaboratively attempt to accomplish selected goals to grow professionally and improve students' learning outcomes (e.g., DuFour, 2004; Kristmanson, Lafergue & Culligan, 2011). TSG is also a form of teacher action research that often contains problem identification, inquiry, action, and reflection (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007; Gregson, 2004; Young, Rapp & Murphy, 2010).

Research indicates that TSGs provide a valuable opportunity for teachers to join supportive professional communities, and connect with one another (Gersten et al., 2010; Huang, 2007; Thibodeau, 2008). TSGs also provide an avenue for participants to engage in professional dialogue and promote teacher reflection and change in classroom theory and practice (Gusky, 2000; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Meyer et al, 1998).

This session reflects upon two separate case studies of teacher study groups comprised of world language teachers. The first TSG includes six Japanese language teachers at a college level summer intensive course. The second TSG was established by five world language teachers at a small Midwestern college. During their time together, the participants in the TSGs shared ideas, opinions, experiences, resources, and feedback. The case studies examined how TSGs promoted or hindered the creation of the collegial supportive professional communities, and also how the teacher study group activities influenced the teachers' professional development.

Method:

The researcher organized and participated within the two study groups as a participant observer, collecting data including field notes, audio/video recordings of the

group meetings, and questionnaires. The researcher reviewed these multiple measures of data simultaneously during data collection. While searching for regularities, patterns, and research themes (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998), she created categories, comparing and modifying them as she reviewed new data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998). Related categories were organized into “higher-order patterns” or “structures” and finally connected to theories from various paradigms that account for the activities and phenomena related to the research questions (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p.98). She repeated this activity until “a stable pattern, and the model appear[ed] to be complete. (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p.15).

Case Study 1: Research Setting and TSG activities

The first TSG included six Japanese language teachers, all Japanese native speakers, at a college level summer intensive course for eight weeks. In this program, instructors from U.S. universities teamed up to co-teach with teachers from the local teachers' association. The researcher invited all nine instructors (four U.S. teacher and five local) to participate in the teacher study group. Two U.S. teachers and three local teachers, all female, agreed to participate.

The group explored constructivist theory and classroom applications. The group first read academic journals and learned that the transactional model views learners as active participants and owners of their learning (Dewey, 2001). Teachers are to function as “scaffolders” and facilitators who assist student growth and construction of new knowledge (Cazden, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). The participants also became familiar with the concept of a zone of proximal development and the view of the learning as a two way

process through which learners and outside factors transform by a combination of doing and reflecting (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). In the TSGs, participants discussed how they could implement the transactional model of teaching into their university level intensive Japanese language courses. They also shared their experiences with the transactional model teaching, and exchanged opinions and teaching feedback.

The group planned to meet once a week for eight weeks, however two meetings were cancelled due to emergency departmental meetings and other administrative tasks.

Case Study 1: Research Results

During the TSG, some members built closer relationships on an individual level, but the TSG as a group had difficulty in creating a collaborative culture and a supportive, collegial connection among the members. Throughout the eight-week program, the teachers had disagreements regarding the placement and remediation of struggling students. These disagreements created tension among teachers and TSG members at the institution, negatively impacting their relationship. The power structure and the socio-cultural context of the TSG also proved to be a challenge. The teachers from the US universities were to supervise the local teachers and determine their workload. Japan is a hierarchical society (Nakane 1970), and assigned positions and roles made it difficult for members to feel like equal peers and were an obstacle to the free exchange of opinions.

The TSG assisted two participants to transform their theory and practice. Both teachers were initially critical toward the premises of the transactional model and reluctant to incorporate the transactional model of teaching into their classrooms. Through communication with the other teachers and observing classroom examples of

transactional teaching, they noted the potential for improvement in their teaching, and changed their classroom practices using the information they learned through participation in the TSG. For example, one teacher initially felt that a struggling student in her class was a burden and reacted negatively to having the student in her class. When she encountered a core premise of the transactional model - the classroom as a learning community and witnessed the power of collaborative learning in other teachers' classes, she changed her view towards the student and altered her teaching activities so students could more easily assist one another and engage in collaborative work. Both teachers said that they were very content with their "new" teaching and the positive impact it had on student learning.

Case Study 2: Research setting and the TSG activities

The second TSG focused on various cultural learning activities for language courses at a small Midwestern college. The program employed both full time and part-time professors and instructors. The researcher invited all nine colleagues (five full time and four part-time), and three part-time and one full time teacher, all female, agreed to join the group. The researcher taught Japanese and the other participants were Chinese, French, German and Russian teachers.

The group selected cultural teaching as their focus and discussed various cultural teaching activities for foreign language classes. The group determined weekly tasks (ex. brainstorm cultural learning activities for use in future classes) and discussed them in their meetings. They also shared their cultural teaching experiences and exchanged lesson plans and materials.

The group met one-two hours weekly for five weeks during summer break. Due to busy schedules of group members, meeting times were changed multiple times. Two teachers, including the researcher, attended all meetings, but the remaining three teachers missed one or two meetings due to family matters and summer job conflicts.

Case Study 2: Research Results

The group members noted a dramatic impact within the collaborative learning community. All members reported benefits of learning from others and appreciated the feedback they received from their colleagues. Prior to the TSG, a few members claimed that they felt isolated within the department. Due to their hectic schedules and/or the limited on-campus hours as adjunct faculty, prior to this study, participants had had only limited opportunities to mingle with their co-workers. The TSG assisted to break through such isolation. The members stated that they experienced comfort and connectedness among the group, and came to know each other more deeply, both professionally and personally. They decided to keep meeting after the summer vacation and still remain in close contact.

At the end of the teacher study group, four out of five members reported that they would implement new cultural teaching activities (ex. cultural learning weblogs, cultural information rich jokes, TV commercials, etc.) in their future classes. At the group meetings, each teacher shared cultural learning activities they used in class. While exchanging teaching ideas, many questions arose and teachers who were familiar with the focused teaching activity often provided hands-on instruction regarding in-detail material development and teaching procedures. The members pointed out that this kind

of information swapping was the most beneficial and encouraged them to try new techniques in their future classes.

Discussion

The most positive outcome found in the two TSGs was the teacher change observed of the participants during their TSG activities. It is often reported that teachers tend to resist new ideas and are reluctant to modify their teaching (e.g., Elbousty & Bratt, 2010; Richard, 2002). Teachers are very busy with their daily routines and lack time to transfer their teaching training into materials and activities (e.g Gersten, 2010; Kitchen, Parker & Callagher, 2008). They are also skeptical of unknown concepts and not motivated to abandon current methods unless they are experiencing discomfort in their current teaching practices and/or see great potential for positive results with the new techniques (Sarafini, 2002; Schon, 1983; Short & Burke, 1996). A large body of literature maintains that engagement in reflection of one's teaching is a key factor for teacher change (e.g. Schon, 1983; Serafini, 2002; Udall and Rugen, 1997). The TSGs offered the time and the space for participants to engage in professional dialogue that promoted reflection and self-inquiry (Elbousty & Bratt, 2010; Stanley, 2011). The professional dialogue also allowed the teacher to share and receive new knowledge of teaching theory and practices. In addition, the participants witnessed the effectiveness of different teaching though the class observation and communication with co-participants, and receive the hands-on instruction necessary to implement new practices. The resultant environment facilitated and encouraged the cooperating teachers to transform

their teaching and modify their practices to enhance students' language and cultural learning.

Another positive outcome of the TSG was the creation of a collegial relationship among the members. Though they spent limited time together, the second TSG members became connected and successfully supported one another's professional development. The attempted establishment of a collaborative community can be problematic, however, as the example of the first TSG illustrated. A large reason for the first TSG's failure to create a collaborative environment was the on-going conflict among the teachers. The literature suggests that disagreement is a necessary step towards the creation of the sense of community (e.g., Peck, 1987; Putnam and Burke, 1998). When the group members open themselves up to change and share honest opinions, they find differences and that creates conflicts (Putnam & Burke, 1998). Peck (1987) argues that group members need to "empty" themselves to overcome such conflicts. Emptying means to give up one's expectations, preconceptions, prejudice, ideology theology and solutions. It also means to give up the "need to heal, convert, fix or solve" and "need to control". (p. 97). Emptying does not suggest to shed all of one's knowledge and experiences, but rather opening the door to expansion and transformation. The success of any TSG, hinges on the willingness and ability of the participants to collaborate, and participants need to understand the importance of coming to the group with the proper mindset.

Attendance and continuity were among the biggest challenges in both TSGs. When working with professional adults, there are always legitimate professional and personal reasons to cancel a meeting or for one or two participants to fail to attend. Teachers are all busy and it is crucial to scrutinize each members' schedule closely and

select the very best time that works for the all members. If the TSG participants attend a regularly held meeting (ex. school board meeting, scheduled department meeting, etc), it would be a good strategy to “piggyback” schedule the TSG right after such an occasion. Once the schedule is set, members are to make firm commitment to follow the plan. TSGs are often voluntary and it could easily fall apart without such a stated commitment from the individual members.

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