Open Lessons: A Practice to Develop a Learning Community for Teachers

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Interest in improving the quality of professional development in this age of educational reform has intensified (Little 1993) as a growing body of research suggests that teaching practices matter in terms of student achievement (Stronge 2002). Some have argued for embedding professional development in the context of teachers' work in order to transform both teaching practices and the structures and cultures of schools in which teachers practice. These changes are necessary so that teachers can develop innovative teaching practices (Darling-Hammond 1994; Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth 2001; Holmes Group 1990).

Promoting this type of professional development will not be easy for several reasons. Teaching is tremendously complex work (Cohen 1989) and classrooms are complex social organizations (Jackson 1968). In addition, teaching practices are difficult to change (Cohen 1990; Shen and Ma 2006): they require both learning and unlearning by practitioners (Cohen and Ball 1990; Shen 1994, 2002). Beyond that, both the culture and structure of schools militate against changes in teaching (Little 1990; Lortie 1975; Sarason 1982).

Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) developed a set of markers to guide the formation of a workplace-based professional community. The markers, which identify issues that should be addressed when attempting to change teaching practice within the context of schools, may be helpful in developing other professional-development activities in the workplace. One such professional-development activity that may be useful in an environment of trust is what we refer to as "open lessons." Open lessons, as described in this paper, are habitually used in Asian cultures, but not frequently in the United States (Paine 1990; Paine and Ma 1993; Stigler and Stevenson 1991).

The Challenge in Overcoming the Isolated Culture of Teaching

In this brief background statement, we describe the theoretical underpinnings of the workplace-based professional community that Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth developed, and the markers of professional community that they argued are important. Next, we describe how open lessons could help build a professional community.

The theoretical underpinnings of Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth's professional-development opportunity took into account the structural features of the high school, learning environments, and subject-specific pedagogy. As they write,

> After reviewing the educational literature on community, we formulated a model based on the structural features of the urban high school (e.g., time and resources), departmental organization (based on the work by Grossman and Stodolsky 1995), and intellectual features of cooperative learning environments (drawing largely on Brown and Campione's [1994] work on communities of learners; Brown 1992), as well as our own prior work on pedagogical content knowledge and subject specific pedagogy (Grossman 1990; Wilson and Wineburg 1993).

Many have written about the structural features of elementary as well as high schools to which Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth refer and how those structures isolate teachers from one another. Dan Lortie, in his seminal *Schoolteacher* (1975), wrote that there are three unique hallmarks of teaching. One is a culture of "individualism" that is reinforced by the structure of schools, which are organized in self-contained classrooms. Individualism and organization work against changing teaching into a more community-oriented undertaking. By individualism, Lortie means that public schools are "staffed by people who have little concern with building a shared technical culture" (p. 67).

Shen has pointed out that the isolation teachers feel in public schools is one reason for high teacher attrition rates (Shen 1997). Those who stay in public school teaching may enjoy the individualistic nature of the work, yet ironically, those who may be most willing to develop a shared technical culture are most likely to leave. Lortie made a similar argument by stating that the second hallmark of public school teachers is their "conservatism." He argues that "teaching . . . is more likely to appeal to people who approve of prevailing practice than to those who are critical of it" (p. 29); that is, most teachers like the practice of teaching in individual classrooms and the traditional methods of teaching in those classrooms.

Finally, Lortie argues that a third feature of the teaching labor force is "presentism"—that is, "the dominancy of present versus future orientations among teachers" (p. 86). Grossman and her colleagues addressed all three of these cultural issues in the way they built the professional community, which was composed of participants from two departments, English and history. Members of those two departments created a cross-discipline curriculum and read literature and history together. According to Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth, they did so to address these structural and cultural norms.

Much has been written about the occupational norms of privacy that impede joint work among teachers (Little 1990; Lortie 1975). The norms are maintained in part by the temporal organization of the school day, which limits teachers' interactions to fleeting encounters at lunchtime or to the rushed minutes before and after school.

Another theoretical underpinning of this work was a community of learners, as referred to in their organizing framework, which allowed teachers to cooperate on two specific tasks—writing the curriculum, and reading literature and history together. Finally came the third theoretical underpinning of this work: the teachers used ideas concerning (a) pedagogical knowledge, the "how to" of teaching; (b) disciplinary knowledge, the "what" of teaching; and (c) pedagogical content knowledge, or the knowledge of how teachers teach specific disciplines.

Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth found that the markers of creating professional communities in the workplace included

a. forming group identity and norms of interaction
b. navigating fault lines, that is, dealing with deeply rooted conflicts within the group
c. negotiating the essential tension, which in this case meant a tension between the two purposes of the group—teacher learning (the readings) and student learning (building curriculum)
d. accepting communal responsibility for individual growth

When we examined those markers of professional community, we began to think about other activities that workplace professional communities could undertake. Such activities may help groups work through these markers, realizing that the process of working together would take some time. We believe that open lessons might be such an opportunity. In open lessons, teachers develop a common lesson plan; then one teacher pilots the lesson with a group of students, who work to improve the plan before it is demonstrated a final time with a different group for colleagues to observe. The lesson may be either a polished one or something new that teachers are trying out. Teachers then discuss the lesson

with colleagues to think collectively about how to improve the lesson's content knowledge and pedagogy.

These open lessons are rooted in the markers that Grossman and her colleagues see as professional-workplace communities because over time, as they suggest, groups would need to

a.   form a deep sense of trust, which would include norms of inter-action, in order to share their practice with others
b.   allow conflicts in understandings about subject matter and peda-gogy to surface in order to understand one another's teaching
c.   focus on both teacher and student learning
d.   take responsibility for one another's learning.

ABCs of the Open Lesson

The practice of the open lesson has implications for helping over-come the culture of teacher isolation that prevails in American educa-tion (Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth 2001; Lortie 1975). Some researchers discussed the Chinese concept of the open lesson (e.g., Huang and Bao 2006; Ma 1999; Paine 1990; Paine and Ma 1993; Stigler and Stevenson 1991). Below, we will systematically introduce this prac-tice and discuss its implications for the U.S. teaching profession. Open-lesson professional development can be important for sharing teaching experiences, demonstrating new teaching methods and techniques, overcoming the isolated culture of teaching, and improving the effec-tiveness of teaching.

What is an open lesson? An open lesson is a professional-develop-ment activity in which (a) someone, usually a teacher, teaches a lesson to his or her regular class; (b) colleagues—and sometimes researchers and parents—observe the lesson; and (c) the teacher and the observers dis-cuss and reflect upon the lesson. The characteristics of the open lesson include the following: the students are usually the teacher's regular stu-dents; the content of the lesson is part of the standardized curriculum; the lesson is usually a demonstration or an exploration; and after the open lesson, there is always a session for collective reflection.

Who teaches open lessons? Classroom teachers present most of the open lessons, although university faculty or other researchers will occa-sionally do so, too. Classroom teachers who offer open lessons range from novice teachers to the exceptionally experienced. Novice teach-ers' lessons are usually exploratory, while those taught by experienced teachers are often for demonstration.

Who observes open lessons? The "observers" of open lessons could be teachers from the same school; those who teach the same subject matter within the same county- or city-based school system; or occa-

sionally teachers from all over the country. The number of the observers ranges from as few as three to five colleagues to as many as thirty to fifty teachers, and in very few cases, as many as three hundred to five hundred teachers.

Who sponsors open lessons? The organizers of open lessons could be the county- or city-based education bureau, the school, or the professional association. Every year the bureau will organize open lessons. It will designate teachers who will teach open lessons and then provide those lessons as a professional-development opportunity to other teachers—usually teachers of the same subject matter—within the administrative boundary. A school could also be an organizer. School-based open lessons usually involve exchanging between novice and experienced teachers and promoting certain types of school-based renewal. In recent years, some professional associations have also sponsored open lessons that usually transcend administrative boundaries.

A Case of an Open Lesson

The open lesson is a collective effort. From designing the lesson to reflecting on the lesson taught, teacher community is a common theme running through the whole process. The following is an example of an open lesson that took place in Jiading District, Shanghai (Zhen 2003). In 2003, a group of thirteen teachers who taught eighth-grade Chinese language arts and reading formed an action research group. They wanted to explore ways in which to connect students' experience with reading materials, with a particular focus on the affective domain of students' experience. They decided to offer an open lesson among themselves once a month. One of the teachers taught an open lesson in 2003. The content was a passage entitled "In Memory of Space Shuttle *Challenger*," which came from the middle school textbook series in Shanghai.

The first step in offering the open lesson was that the group of thirteen teachers developed the lesson plan together. This kind of collective approach, not atypical for planning an open lesson, reduced the pressure on the teacher who gave the lesson.

The second step was an instructional rehearsal. Essentially, the teacher taught one of his parallel classes as a trial run. It is common at the eighth-grade level that a Chinese language arts and reading teacher has two parallel classes, so it is feasible to have the instructional rehearsal in one.

The third step was to revise the lesson plan. After the rehearsal, the group of thirteen teachers discussed whether the lesson had achieved its instructional objectives—in this case, connecting student experience with the reading materials. After exploring the strengths and

weaknesses of the lesson, the group revised the lesson plan for the formal open lesson.

The fourth step was to teach the open lesson formally. Based on the revised lesson plan, the teacher formally taught the open lesson in his other regular class. The observers were the twelve other teachers in the action-research group. Because the classroom was able to accommodate the twelve additional teachers, the open lesson was offered in the regular classrooms. (It is common to move to a larger space if more observers are involved.)

The teacher first introduced the lesson:

> The first human flight was by the Wright brothers. Although it lasted only fifty-nine seconds and flew 259.75 meters, it demonstrated the ambition and courage of the human kind and laid a foundation for further explorations.

> However, the process of exploration was not without dangers. At 11:38 a.m., EST, January 28, 1986, the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded about one minute after liftoff. The crew of seven astronauts, including a teacher, died.

> This was one of the most significant tragedies in the history of space exploration. Then-President Ronald Reagan expressed his sadness for the tragedy, but vowed that the space exploration would continue and that more spaceships and astronauts would be sent into space.

The teacher then asked a question for students to connect their experiences with the tragedy: "How do you think of the tragedy of the space shuttle *Challenger*?"

The students then connected with their own experience and offered answers such as:

> "Exploration and failure always go hand in hand."
> "Exploration needs courage."
> "Exploration should be based on science."
> "Exploration creates the future for humankind."

The teacher then gave guidance about using students' personal experiences to substantiate the statements they made and drawing meaning from their experience. The teacher formally introduced the passage "In Memory of Space Shuttle *Challenger*," and students began to read the passage. The open lesson continued. After the formal open lesson, the last step was to reflect upon the lesson that just had been taught

and observed. During the reflection, the teacher who taught the open lesson raised three issues for discussion:

a. How much time should be allocated to reading and how much to discussion?
b. How could the time spent on addressing students' spontaneous questions and the time allocated be balanced?
c. What kinds of questions could effectively raise students' interest in reading the passage?

There were two camps among the twelve teachers who observed the lesson. One group felt that it was a successful lesson. The positive comments included: much interaction between the teacher and the students; guidance for students about connecting their experience with the reading materials; and balance between understanding the passage and discussing the materials. The other group felt the lesson needed considerable improvement. The critical arguments included the following: (a) the designed instructional process was too complicated; (b) it took too long to begin the actual reading by the students; and (c) the teacher emphasized the importance of exploration, which limited the ways in which students connected their experiences with the reading materials. As we can see from the case above, individual as well as collective reflection can help teachers transcend the isolated culture of teaching and develop a professional community.

Implications of Open Lessons

Open lessons provide opportunities for developing the markers of community formation formulated by Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth:

a. forming group identity and norms of interaction
b. navigating the fault lines, or handling conflict
c. negotiating the essential tension, or negotiating how to address both student learning and teacher learning
d. creating communal responsibility for individual growth

The first marker, forming group identity and creating norms of interaction, is at least partially addressed in the open-lessons professional-development opportunities. The teachers and others don't just observe another teacher's lesson plan, but rather participate in its conception and implementation so that all the teachers have some stake in ensuring a solid and correctly implemented lesson plan. How they work together requires adjustment within the context of the group; that is, moving the

group from one of multiple individuals with individual perspectives to a true community of those with a respect for multiple perspectives would be an important aspect of implementing professional community.

The second marker, handling conflict, would also be addressed in open lessons because the two-stage process of implementing the lesson plan allows conflicts to surface before the final exploration or demonstration. In our example, the teachers were not of like mind at the end of the demonstration. Whether teachers would "agree to disagree" on the value of the lesson or not, the process of open lessons would enable them to handle conflict.

The third marker requires that the professional-development opportunity concern both student learning and teacher learning. Open lessons focus strongly on students' learning, the way the open lesson introduced here focuses on connecting students' experience with reading materials and is tried out twice on two different sets of students. However, it also focuses on the teacher's learning to teach. In China, with a largely standardized curriculum, teachers may be familiar with the content of the lessons, and the focus is more upon pedagogy. In the United States, with a less-standardized curriculum, teachers may increase both their content and pedagogic knowledge through an open lesson as teachers work together to create the lesson.

Finally, the fourth marker requires the community to take responsibility for individual growth. This marker is certainly inherent in the model of open lessons: the teacher teaching the lesson receives feedback from the community while the community ensures that the lesson is well executed, due to the collective nature of its formation.

In terms of overcoming the isolated culture of teaching and creating a professional community, open lessons have great potential. However, developing norms that would allow U.S. teachers to utilize open lessons fully may not be easy. As Lortie (1975) first noted and Little (1990) and others have affirmed, teaching has endured largely as an assemblage of entrepreneurial individuals whose autonomy is grounded in norms of privacy and noninterference, and the very organization of teaching work sustains that tendency.

Therefore, ground rules for open-lesson participation may need further development before undertaking such a task, which would work against the grain of teaching culture and organization in the United States. Those invited to participate in such a professional-development opportunity would need to be willing participants. If they are working in subject-matter-specific areas, they also would need to develop at least some rudimentary shared understandings of the purposes of the curriculum within the context of their school and across disciplines. They would also need to think deeply about the content and pedagogy of

each lesson: whether the content worked within their own state standards and benchmarks, and how they would assess student knowledge and understanding of the lesson.

Coda: Functions of Open Lessons

In China an open lesson is a major professional-development activity, introduced by educators from the former Soviet Union in the 1950s. The Soviet experts offered open lessons as a major vehicle to reform teaching in China. Ironically, open lessons are seldom taught in Russia today.

Open lessons provide a forum in which the theory and practice of teaching are integrated, the content of the lesson is part of the regular curriculum, and the teacher and the observers may engage in two-way reflection immediately after the lesson's conclusion. It is indeed job-embedded professional development. Even in today's world where videotaping and podcasting are readily available, the value of building a professional community to overcome the isolation of teachers is something that new technologies will not necessarily accomplish. The functions of open lessons are:

- First, an open lesson is a forum for sharing teaching experience. Through open lessons, novice and experienced teachers can exchange the wisdom they have accumulated. Open lessons provide interaction between the individual and the collective experience. Open lessons create an opportunity for learning across disciplines and administrative units.
- Second, an open lesson provides an opportunity for action research. "Teachers are action researchers" is a notion generally accepted in China since the mid-1990s. Teachers have many questions in their daily professional lives. The principles of teaching and learning, which tend to be general, cannot give specific answers to all the questions teachers have. They must therefore explore on their own. Open lessons provide a mechanism for exploring complex and perplexing issues in their professional lives.
- Third, an open lesson can also be a platform for demonstration. When a new curriculum is being implemented, or when a new teaching method is being promoted, open lessons offer an effective approach to demonstrating how to teach the new curriculum or how to employ the new teaching method. The open lesson is theory in action.

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This is the first of a two-part series on current practices in Chinese education.