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# Building Collaborative Pedagogy: Lesson Study in Higher Education

Krystal H. Chenault

## Abstract

In this discussion-based article, the author considers the benefits of an in-depth collaborative model for curricular and faculty development, the Japanese lesson study, a method that is largely untested in higher education, though the few instances of its usage have produced promising results. The author examines the barriers to faculty collaboration in higher education as well as practical solutions for encouraging collaboration, grassroots leadership, and social development using the lens of prominent leadership theories.

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Building Collaborative Pedagogy: Lesson Study in Higher Education “The norms of the higher education community at large encourage autonomy and independence” (Uchiyama & Radin, 2008, p. 271).

Indeed, autonomy and independence are unwavering values that undergird the structures of power and professional advancement in higher education. From inter-institutional competition for enrollment to intra-institutional competition for funding, promotion, and tenure, the higher education landscape is built upon competition and individualism, values that can be passed on to students in the way they mobilize their learning, despite society’s increasing demand for self-motivated leaders that can collaborate and lead others to success (Fein, 2014; Uchiyama & Radin, 2008). When it comes to classroom instruction, Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone (2011) describe a fundamental shift in higher education from institutions of teaching, in which instructors serve as singular arbiters of knowledge, to institutions of learning that value growth, cooperation, and evolution of thought. Classroom instruction in higher education can be a microcosm of the values of the institution and of society, as distilled through the instructor. Therefore, it becomes ever more imperative that classroom content and curricula are thoughtfully designed and implemented in a way reflective of the collaborative, evolutionary values proving beneficial for institutions of higher education today and of the future.

Leadership in higher education plays a crucial role in ushering in this shift to collaboration and the

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empowerment of others within individual classrooms, academic departments, and campus wide. After all, the fundamental hallmarks of leadership are envisioning the institution's ideal future (Nadler & Tushman, 1995) and cultivating and facilitating change (Kotter, 1995) to meet that vision. A vision of an institution of higher education built upon community and collaboration requires a shift from professional competition to cooperation among higher education faculty, a cultural change that leaders must shrewdly pioneer through a gentle ebb and flow of power that ultimately empowers faculty to lead each other to work collaboratively.

## Faculty Collaboration: Benefits and Barriers

According to Uchiyama and Radin (2009), collaboration, collegiality, and relationship building are values that transcend mission and profession but are especially relevant in an educational environment. Teaching as a profession can be a paradox because it can be simultaneously social and isolating. Teachers interact extensively with students in a professional capacity, but opportunities for professional interaction with peers can be limited, even though its presence can be highly beneficial for faculty climate and educational outcomes. Kelchtermans (2006) found that increased collegiality among faculty provides moral support and promotes confidence and instructional innovation, while Hindin, Morocco, Mott, and Aguilar (2007) attest that faculty collaboration helps facilitate personal reflection and the drive to work together within a common mission.

However, the lack of a common purpose and larger sense of belonging are frequently cited reasons for faculty disillusionment and turnover (Barnes, Agago, & Coombs,

1998; Tierney & Rhoads, 1994; Uchiyama & Radin, 2009). Furthermore, the often competitive pursuit of research and tenure leaves little room for collaboration and social integration among faculty (Demir, Czerniak, & Hart, 2013), as faculty members' individual professional pursuits may have little or nothing to do with the mission of the institution and the goals of other faculty members (Briggs, 2007; Uchiyama & Radin, 2009), let alone student learning outcomes. The lack of opportunities for workplace collaboration and relationship-building in higher education can leave faculty feeling isolated and lethargic in their professional obligations, especially in the classroom (Briggs, 2007; Demir et al., 2013; Lester & Kezar, 2012; Uchiyama & Radin, 2008).

A solution to increase collaboration and scholarly reflection can be found in form of centralized curricular collaboration among higher education faculty. Hutchings et al. (2011) describe a "teaching commons" in higher education, (p. 2), a space for collaboration, innovation, and pedagogical inquiry that situates teaching as a cooperative scholarly endeavor that encourages faculty to form communities of teaching and learning that can counteract the sense of isolation ingrained in the individualistic culture of higher education. This "cycle of inquiry, evidence, and improvement makes the scholarship of teaching and learning a powerful form of professional growth and development" (Hutchings et al., 2011, p. 118) and can serve as an integral tool to develop a sense of respect, collegiality, and opportunity for personal and professional reflection. What's more, improved congruence among course material and even instructional style can improve the social and professional relevance in student outcomes, both of which are crucial elements that many scholars and

practitioners argue is lacking in many curricula in higher education (Briggs, 2007; Nduna, 2012).

## Collaborative Teaching in Action: The Lesson Study Model

Lester and Kezar (2010) chronicle two types of faculty collaboration as kinds of grassroots leadership: sense-making and problem solving. Indeed, task-oriented group activities involved in problem-solving collaborative initiatives kindle the self-direction and leadership necessary for a wider collaborative culture to take hold department-wide and beyond. But while also allowing for the development of participants' leadership skills, sense-making collaborations allow more for the cultivation of comprehensive social bonds. These social bonds ensure that a collaborative culture isn't just built around utilitarian tasks that come and go after they are dealt with but are a fundamental part of the socio-emotional experience of the workplace.

One model for sense-making collaborations as vehicles for grassroots leadership is the lesson study. Started in Japanese primary schools, the lesson study approaches teaching and learning from a constructivist standpoint (Fosnot, 1996), which emphasizes cooperation and reciprocity in making meaning and understanding reality (Demir et al., 2013). Lesson study is a profoundly collaborative approach to teaching in which a team of instructors designs and revises a curriculum as well as offers one another advice and support in critiquing individual lessons (Cerbin & Kopp, 2006; Demir et al., 2013). Lesson study is so common in Japan that nearly all Japanese teachers belong to a lesson study group (Cerbin & Kopp, 2006), though the model is a predominantly novel approach in North America,

cropping up in a small number of public and private primary and secondary schools.

Lesson study works like this: a team of instructors, usually from the same or related academic departments engage in profound reflection and discussion about the strategies and goals surrounding a related set of courses in hopes of analyzing areas of student need as well as how the coursework fits in with the larger institutional mission. The fruits of these collaborative efforts include a functional lesson plan developed from the wide array of expertise of the faculty involved in its development and an on-going, in-depth analysis of the success of the lessons contained in the lesson plan as well as plans for future improvement (Cerbin & Kopp, 2006). Analysis of coursework follows peer observations and a debriefing process following each class. Instructors collaborate to examine which parts of the curriculum worked, which didn't, and why. This process of reciprocal reflection and knowledge consolidation is a powerful tool not only for improving student outcomes but also allowing for deeper levels of interpersonal bonding among participants. Instructors learn to question how students learn and not just what they learn as well as to approach their professional responsibilities with reflective curiosity and a desire for personal growth. Along with this desire for growth comes the desire to facilitate the growth of others. Successful teaching becomes not just a personal triumph; when faculty become involved in each other's pedagogy on such a deep level, a well-taught classroom of engaged students is a shared victory. Likewise, a disastrous lesson no longer has to weigh on one individual alone. Unsuccessful lessons simply become part of a fluid process of trial and error, a reconciling of students' diverse talents and learning styles with faculty's

wide array of expertise and opinions. Instructional failures no longer have to ruminate in the brain of one person; if multiple faculty members not only have intimate knowledge of the lesson as well as a personal stake in its success, it's in everyone's best interest to collaborate in figuring out what can be done to improve future lessons.

Lesson study is mostly untested in higher education. Cerbin and Kopp (2006) and Demir et al. (2013) implemented pilot lesson study programs in higher education contexts, and the benefits seen in K-12 institutions indeed carry over to higher education. Demir and colleagues reported lesson study promoted “reform-based pedagogical practices, reflective teaching, and awareness of student thinking and misconceptions” (p. 25). Faculty who participated in lesson study claimed their teaching was improved because they were able to examine student learning in a way they had never done before; they were able to step out of the habits of their well-worn teaching styles and incorporate new ideas (Demir et al., 2013). Cerbin and Kopp (2006) found reported similar results, with lesson study being categorized as a form of focused practitioner research that focuses on how students learn and how instructors impact that learning, all with the added benefits of faculty affiliation and bonding. Cerbin and Kopp (2006) continue by stating that lesson study has the potential to be an exceptionally useful tool for maximizing teaching and collaboration in higher education: “It scaffolds reflective practice in which instructors carefully examine goals for student learning and development, design goal-oriented learning experiences, conduct a lesson, observe and analyze student learning and revise the lesson design to improve learning” (p. 253). Lesson study opens up the

lines of inquiry into and about student learning and does so in a fashion that is built upon peer support and knowledge sharing.

Japanese lesson study is usually centered around the individual school's "research focus," which is a set of "school-wide goals ... such as curiosity, independent thinking, tolerance of individual differences and so forth" (Cerbin & Kopp, 2006, p. 251). Similarly, lesson study in higher education could be centered around the institution's mission or even leadership's vision for the department, which could possibly be formulated on a more grassroots level than the overall institutional mission. Overall, lesson study offers the potential for curricular collaboration to be consistently shared through an ongoing process of conception, implementation, and reflection, all to the great benefit of students and faculty, both professionally and socially.

## Barriers to Faculty Collaboration: Solutions for Leaders

Despite all the recorded and potential benefits for both students and faculty, frequent and centralized curricular collaboration among college faculty like lesson study may often meet with ambivalence, doubt, or resistance.

Lesson study, for instance, is time consuming and may interfere with other faculty obligations, like research and advising (Demir et al., 2013). What's more, the culture of autonomy in content and knowledge ownership continually permeates the curricula in higher education, and any move toward collective ownership of practical knowledge can be seen as unnecessarily risky or a waste of effort, especially since faculty often view teaching quality as an undervalued aspect of professional success (Demir et al., 2013). And perhaps even more so than

research, classroom content and instruction can be viewed by faculty as deeply personal and tied to the self, and therefore, critiquing and analyzing one's own instructional practices and the instructional practices of colleagues may be uncomfortable or difficult to manage. In fact, Demir et al. (2013) reveal that faculty members taking part in their lesson study model frequently found the observation and peer debriefing process to be awkward and invasive, often devaluing their own potential contributions as intrusive or unfounded. Therefore, despite increasing calls for curricular cohesion and workplace relevance (Briggs, 2007; Nduna, 2012), the subjectivity of pedagogy remains a barrier as long as collaboration is viewed as overstepping one's bounds or a usurping of power.

In addition to the nebulousness of position and hierarchy among faculty participants in curriculum collaboration, the role of the formal leader in these exchanges can also be a point of contention. Demir et al. (2013) characterize the role of the facilitator in the lesson study model as instrumental to the effort's success but also the most contentious. A facilitator too focused on task delegation and oversight may take away from the crucial group led, power-sharing dynamic of the model; faculty may begin to view the lesson study as a task they are being forced to complete and are more likely to view it as detracting from important individual responsibilities, such as research and advising. However, an absent facilitator, or a facilitator who did not undergo the gradual acclimation of faculty members to the concepts of power sharing and grassroots leadership, may be viewed as too laissez-faire or shirking his or her responsibilities as a leader (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). After all, not all individuals are readily equipped to accept leadership responsibilities,

even if the responsibility is only over oneself. Kelley (1995) characterizes followership patterns ranging from independent and critical thinking individuals who are ready and willing to accept leadership responsibilities, to dependent and uncritically thinking individuals who are less apt to accept responsibilities for even self-leadership, let alone the leadership of others. And if a leader isn't adequately prepared to empower individuals with widely variable levels of enthusiasm toward self-direction and cooperation, the in-depth curricular analysis and trust building in lesson study may be frustrating and fruitless for those involved.

Apart from the logistical or structural issues with lesson study and other centralized curricular collaborations, oftentimes the climate of many institutions of higher education is not conducive to widespread, top-down collaborative directives. Fein (2014) characterizes leader-led faculty collaboration as artificial, and faculty will likely view it as such. After all, Fein argues, there are no tangible, policy-driven barriers to faculty collaboration, so reforms aimed at coordinating collaborative efforts may be viewed as unnecessary or an overreach of power. Lester and Kezar (2012) agree that effective organizational change in higher education rarely comes directly from leaders but from the members of the institution operating at all levels. For this reason, it's crucial that leaders wishing to encourage more widespread curricular analysis and collaboration carefully and gradually facilitate a culture of dialogue, empowerment, and collective leadership from the ground up.

## SuperLeaders and Follower Empowerment

Followers empowerment and the cultivation of grassroots leadership are common themes in leadership literature over the past two decades. Kelley (1995) advocates a leveling of the power structure of the leader-follower dynamic and suggests that followership and leadership are equal parts of the same goal, just encompassing different tasks. And according to Gardner (1995), the key task of leadership is to empower followers to develop internally motivated passion for the goals and values of the collective group, a drive that should persist in the leader's presence or absence, as well as serve to increase the self-worth and confidence of all involved (Rosener, 1995). Indeed, the central goal of the 21st century leader should be to create more leaders and a collaborative culture that inspires the group while "satisfying basic human needs for achievement, a sense of belonging, recognition, self-esteem, a feeling of control over one's life, and the ability to live up to one's ideals" (Kotter, 1995, p. 120). In other words, leaders should serve as beacons of encouragement emboldening individuals to follow their own natural course toward achievement and affiliation, two important facets that comprise a happy, fulfilling workplace. And if faculty members view collaboration as a relinquishment of power, leaders must introduce the idea that power is not a finite resource to be given up or taken by other group members or by whoever is supposed to be in charge; power is a fluid and unlimited resource that proliferates the more people cooperate and contribute and encourage others to do the same.

If leaders in higher education can inspire faculty members to feel compelled by their own internally motivated desires to impart change and improve conditions for work and learning within their immediate

environments, whether it's within their department or campus-wide, an increasingly collaborative academic culture will emerge more smoothly. Research shows that faculty already collaborate on a more informal level to the benefit of the faculty members involved and their students (Briggs, 2007; Lester & Kezar, 2012). These unofficial brainstorming sessions are valuable tools for improving student outcomes as well as building community and leadership among faculty. Therefore, the goal of leaders in higher education isn't necessarily to legitimize informal faculty collaboration but to illuminate it as a form of collective leadership that can be fostered into a more collaborative culture campus-wide.

By sharing power and situating collaboration as a central tenet of the institution's culture, a leader can work toward making doubtful, directionless individuals feel that their group is "leaderful," rather than "leaderless" (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 84), situating curricular collaboration models like lesson study as professional endeavors in which all faculty members hold a stake. To these ends, leaders in higher education must relinquish a considerable amount of power in order to allow "leaderful" groups of energetic faculty to emerge organically. Manz and Sims (1995) put forth the concept of SuperLeadership as an invaluable perspective to consider when instituting a power-sharing, highly collaborative professional environment. Much like Greenleaf's (1995) servant leadership in which those individuals with systemic power relinquish that power in order to allow others to emerge as leaders, SuperLeaders facilitate the gradual hand-off of power and leadership responsibilities from the formal leader to the members of the group in such a way that collaborative groups of self-motivated leaders form naturally out of common

interests, values, and needs. But even servant leadership implies an innate hierarchy that servant leaders are willing to invert for the sake of those below them; rather, SuperLeadership involves dismissal of hierarchy all together and a sharing of power rather than giving it away.

For a leader, the key to successful collaboration is the gradual professional and personal development of her associates by creating opportunities for collaboration and social bonding. Garvey Berger (2013) emphasizes the importance of the leader's ability to evaluate the members of an organization and their developmental needs, both socially and professionally, as well as to guide them to the next level of social function. Manz and Sims (1995) illustrate the central tasks of SuperLeadership as developing the practical skills necessary for successful collaboration and self-leadership. Briggs (2007), Lester and Kezar (2010), and Preskill and Brookfield (2009) suggest offering frequent and fulfilling opportunities for collaboration and discussion. By facilitating faculty dialogue beyond direct task fulfillment or any other departmental demands, leaders can help faculty build a rapport and respectful professional relationships in which they view one another not as competition, but as equal scholar-practitioners with whom they can derive expertise as well as emotional and professional support.

## Narrative Experience and Supportive Self-Critique

By encouraging professionally engaging discourse among faculty, leaders in higher education can help build a larger collaborative culture that recognizes the value of working with others to make sense of the academic

landscape faculty members navigate every day. Garvey Berger (2013) presents the metaphor of “getting on the balcony” in professionally interactive environments as a way of rising above one’s own immediate desires, fears, and interpretations and appreciating the experiences of others, not just for how they might affect one’s own interests, but how they affect the larger group. By encouraging a collaborative culture built upon narrative experiences, leaders in higher education can help faculty members rise above their own immediate hardships and triumphs by sharing in each other’s and thinking critically about how these experiences gel with their own behaviors and perceptions. The key is for leaders to create as many of these opportunities for dialogue and sharing ideas as they can, possibly in a more informal fashion so as to maintain the virtues of a voluntary grassroots leadership group detailed by Briggs (2007) and Lester and Kezar (2010) but also in a more structured, guided way so as to encourage participation and reduce member attrition.

Preskill and Brookfield (2009) offer guidelines and prompts for leaders to help facilitate occasions for narrative sharing and self-critique. They describe “The Talking Practice Group” (p. 28), a voluntary gathering focused on sharing teaching experiences, triumphs, failures, and questions. These meetings are unstructured and focused on building alliances and simply venting about classes, which are key elements of the lesson study model. Leaders can be the catalyst for these get-togethers, but it is crucial that they are member-led so that faculty can begin to develop self-direction and not feel as if they are being forced to interact with one another. The Talking Practice Group can serve as a precursor to more a more formal lesson study

arrangement, or lesson study-like practices may even emerge organically as faculty members form bonds over common interests or goals.

A wider sense of affiliation and belonging can arise from these narrative sharing experiences and curriculum collaboration may bloom more organically, which may further complement other tools that could be used in tandem with lesson study, like Preskill and Brooks' (2009) Critical Incident Questionnaire. These short questionnaires can be given to students periodically and serve as a means of helping faculty analyze their instruction. Questions include:

- At what moment in the class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
- At what moment in the class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
- What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful?
- What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
- What about the class surprised you the most?

Using questionnaires such as the CIQ could serve as a starting point for faculty members to begin to dissect their instructional and curricular choices with the help of their peers. As previously detailed by Demir et al. (2013), faculty members using lesson study to improve their curriculum and instructional choices often complained of feeling uncomfortable critiquing each other's teaching or accepting critique about their own teaching. But if faculty use the CIQ as a starting point for self-critique as well as accepting critique from others, the feeling of over-

stepping one's bounds might be lessened, especially if faculty members are just helping each other make sense of what the students express as being an issue for them. The CIQ could follow a class session observed by another faculty member as part of lesson study so the observer would have the context to help the instructor make sense of what the students are expressing. The ease of the critique could be amplified even more if the faculty members have already built a rapport during informal, leader-facilitated social events like The Talking Practice Group.

Lester and Kezar (2010) reiterate the importance of building trust in grassroots leadership teams through connecting professional tasks to shared personal experiences, which not only serves to build trust and increase the quality of collaborative efforts but also “assist[s] teams in reaching cognitive complexity” (Lester & Kezar, 2010, p. 122). This cognitive complexity is similar to the social development described by Garvey Berger (2013) when she describes the disparate levels of social functioning experienced by members of an organization at all different professional levels and how optimal functioning is marked by empathy, critical reflection, and openness to growth opportunities. Learning to make sense of the experiences of others, Garvey Berger continues, is crucial in the cultivation of the higher social functioning necessary for effective collaboration. Garvey Berger suggests certain active listening techniques for group members to make the most of narrative sharing as a means of moving toward growth and effective collaboration. For example, “moving your questions to the edge” (Garvey Berger, 2013, p. 50) is a way of taking interest in the narrative experiences of others beyond surface content and into the wider context

of the social self-involved in making the decisions that person made and expressing their narrative experience they have chosen to express it. “Be really curious” and “judge slowly” (Garvey Berger, 2013, pp. 51-52 ) are additional interpersonal tools for group members to increase their capacity for empathy as well as a way to think introspectively and examine their own worldviews by thinking critically about the views of others, both of which are instrumental in ushering in a larger culture of cooperation and understanding. Once the cycle of collaboration and reflection in lesson study becomes common practice, quality leadership and self-direction can bloom at all levels with little more than gentle guidance from top-down leadership.

## Transformational Development through Collaboration

When implementing intensely involved models of collaboration like the lesson study, leaders will likely encounter a wide array of not only willingness to collaborate from faculty but also varying levels of social capabilities for collaboration. In this case, leaders can employ Garvey Berger’s (2013) guidelines in identifying and improving the social development of different types of faculty members, as successful collaboration often requires high levels of social functioning from its participants. Garvey Berger (2013) utilizes Kegan’s (1994) constructivist development theory to detail four stages of human social development that can help leaders make sense of the reality in which their employees are situated: self-sovereign, socialized, self-authoring, and self-transforming. Individuals operating under lower levels of social development, like the self-sovereign mind and even the socialized mind, may resist and fail to benefit from collaborative work until they can be moved

to further development by their need to make sense of their new and complex experiences. The self-sovereign mind is intensely self-interested and superficial, and while Kegan (1994) insists that developmental stages are consistent across situations without regression, it can be easy for faculty members operating in the autonomous, and often competitive higher education landscape to get stuck in this simplistic, ego-driven way of thinking as a means of bolstering their professional survival. Self-sovereign individuals can fail to see the connections between themselves and others, so being asked to connect their previously self-governing instructional lives with a larger collective of pedagogical perspectives can seem frustrating or a waste of time. Even for individuals operating from the developmental level above the self-sovereign, like the socialized mind, alternative perspectives can lead to dissonance and confusion because they lack the social capacity to easily reconcile their own perspectives with those of others.

It's key that leaders become adept in identifying and motivating all different levels of social development to ensure smooth transition into a more collaborative environment. For example, leaders can move self-sovereign individuals into a more socialized way of thinking by framing initial attempts at collaboration in a way that directly benefits that individual, perhaps in the form of better student evaluations or smoother interpersonal exchanges within the department. By facilitating development in this way, leaders help these individuals gain the capability of understanding the connections between themselves and others and become motivated by external forces like the values of the group or some sort of larger mission beyond themselves. Once they appreciate the connectivity among all members of

the lesson study, socialized faculty can begin to move to a self-authoring phase in which they can feel less threatened by the others' critiques and suggestions and feel empowered to become better teachers and scholars of pedagogy.

Garvey Berger (2013) asserts that these developmental changes transform our way of thinking about what we know about ourselves and what we know about others. Leaders using a social development lens when encouraging collaborative practices are helping faculty view their curriculum and their instruction in a new way by engaging in reciprocal exchanges of knowledge with peers or potential mentors. Furthermore, intense collaboration like lesson study allows practitioners to “rub theories together,” as Garvey Berger puts it, by examining pedagogy from all different perspectives and levels of experience. And Garvey Berger continues by stating that “taking new theories and putting them together—especially theories, practices, or ideas that are contradictory—gives us practice in holding the paradoxes of what it means to be human” (p. 93). Learning to confront and reconcile the complexities and contradictions of collaborative work can help move faculty to higher levels of social development, and in turn, become more adept at self-direction and leading others.

## Conclusion

In reference to successful leadership, Lao Tzu (1995) said, “the wise leader is like water ... water is fluid and responsive ... like water, the leader is yielding. Because the leader does not push, the group does not resent or resist” (p.70). When encouraging a supportive educational culture that values experiences,

collaboration, and development, a leader must take her place as an equal member of the group and help make the environment fertile for the free exchange of ideas and the cultivation of self-directed leaders, much like water in soil. The most successful organizations are fluid and open to new ideas, and one of the most powerful ways to stay fluid and adaptable is to encourage the free flow of ideas on a constant basis, to make communication and teamwork a key component of the mission and culture. Lesson study is just one way for leadership in higher education to encourage the collaboration and grassroots leadership that makes educational institutions rich with innovation and prepared to adapt to the ever-changing outside world. Like any cultural change, it is not an easy fix but a commitment from leadership to listen to others and to elevate the practical experiences of teachers to a higher institutional level and encourage faculty to do the same.

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