Conceptualising and Implementing Learning Studies in Hong Kong Primary Schools: some issues.
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I very much enjoyed reading these papers, and believe they make an important contribution to understanding the potential of the process they depict for improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools. I very much liked the concrete accounts some of the papers provided of particular Learning Studies in action. They prompted me to reflect about what more I would like to learn from such case studies. This explains some of the comments I have made below. Lo Mun Ling’s articulation of a clear conceptual framework for Learning Studies, posed some conceptual issues which I felt needed to be addressed and I have considered some of these also below. Finally, Derek Sankey’s account of the lesson conferencing process in the light of Gadamer’s interpretative hermeneutics prompted me to think about how Learning Studies can draw on a range of theoretical resources, in addition to variation theory, to articulate and develop its vision of an educationally worthwhile learning process for both students and their teachers.

Lesson Studies, Learning Studies and Curriculum Change
Learning Studies in Hong Kong draws procedurally on Japanese Lesson Studies. Teachers plan the same lesson together and then modify it as each in turn teaches it through cycles of peer observation and post lesson conferences. As the evaluator of one of the Learning Studies projects I have gathered convincing evidence of the positive impact of the process on teachers and students learning. This impact must be viewed in context. It is a context in which the government of Hong Kong has launched a curriculum reform process that requires teachers to take responsibility for designing learning experiences for their students at the school level within a curriculum framework that classifies the objects of learning (content) in terms of Key Learning Areas (KLA’s). These
are often broader in scope than the traditional school subjects, thereby enabling teachers to develop programmes that link objects of learning in ways that are different to their positioning in subject-based learning. It is in this curriculum change context that the renaming of Lesson Studies as Learning Studies becomes significant. The HK curriculum framework presupposes and indeed articulates pedagogical aims that focus on the development of new kinds of capabilities in students - such as generic thinking skills – and the active learning processes – such as project work - associated with them. Whereas Lesson Study may focus on designing better ways of realizing the customary pedagogical goals, Learning Study is focused on realizing new kinds of pedagogical goals.

Learning Study as a Focus on Learning rather than Teaching. The view that one of the distinguishing features of learning studies is that they focus on learning rather than teaching is expressed in a number of the papers. This appears to contradict some of the evidence they cite; that learning studies challenge the customary practices of the teachers engaged in them and requires them to re-think their teaching methods.

For example, Ko Po Yuk’s paper shows how through a Learning Study teachers came to question a traditional method for handling stories in the classroom; namely, select those aspects of the text which will arouse the interests of students before focussing their attention on the aspect that is critical for the desired learning to occur. Priscilla Lo depicts some of the difficulties teachers had in applying variation theory in their lesson planning for it required them to open up a space for learning that enabled students to freely express and discuss their views of the object of learning – the concepts of ‘evaporation’ and ‘condensation’ - with their peers. They were challenged to devise classroom activities that enabled students to freely express and discuss their ideas with each other. In other words the practical application of variation learning theory
involved teachers in establishing certain conditions for learning in the classroom and therefore focused their attention on teaching methods.

Variation theory can be understood as a theory about the conditions under which educationally worthwhile learning can occur. Inasmuch as Learning Studies focus the attention of teachers on establishing appropriate conditions for worthwhile learning to occur it makes sense to describe them in terms of a focus on learning as long as this not understood to exclude a consideration of teaching methods. I think that the contrast that is being drawn in some of these papers is between the focus for Learning Studies in a certain kind of curriculum change context and a possible focus for Lesson Studies in a context where teachers pedagogical aims and assumptions about appropriate conditions for learning are not being called into question. In the latter context teachers can focus exclusively on questions about how to make their teaching more effective. Priscilla Lo’s paper describes how the teachers involved in a learning study tended to treat it as a Lesson Study in which ‘memory learning’ is their primary pedagogical aim and optimal control over what students learn is assumed to be the primary condition under which such learning occurs. Hence, their focus on methods for optimising control over learning outcomes, such as the provision of work sheets and providing factual information in the form of notes that students could use for homework. Her paper shows how the Learning Study process enabled teachers to call their customary pedagogical aims and assumptions about the conditions of learning into question and helped them to develop the confidence to reconstruct their pedagogical aims and establish new conditions for learning in their classrooms. This confidence was clearly linked to the fact that the Learning Study provides a context in which teachers can develop their pedagogical content knowledge.
Learning Studies and the Development of Teachers’ Pedagogical Content Knowledge.
Lo Mun Ling’s paper outlines three applications of variation theory to learning in the context of Learning Studies. Whereas V1 refers to students understanding of the object of learning V2 refers to the teachers’ understanding of the same object. Three of the papers offer detailed accounts of how students developed their understanding or skills in relation to the object of learning. Evidence is also cited in support of the claim that teachers developed their pedagogical content knowledge in the course of their Learning Studies. Ng Hung Sung’s paper for example portrays changes in teachers understanding of critical aspects of an object of learning, as well as changes in their conception of what constituted a worthwhile object of learning. Given the facts that many primary school teachers in HK are lacking substantial pedagogical content knowledge in some curriculum areas, and that the quality of student learning outcomes depends on them developing it further, it is important to portray the process of teachers developing this knowledge through Learning Studies and the application of variation theory (V2). Such portrayals need to be set alongside portrayals of the application of variation theory to students’ learning (V1).

Are there aspects of Japanese Lesson Study which conflict with the application of variation theory to the development of teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge (V2) and pedagogical practices (V3)?
Portrayals of Learning Studies should in my view include a reflective consideration of the extent to which procedures transferred from Japanese Lesson Studies are matched or mismatched to the application of variation theory with respect to the development of both teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge (V2) and their pedagogical strategies (V3). Learning Studies tends to be portrayed in these papers as a relatively harmonious process in which teachers manage, on the basis of their observations, to
reach a consensual decision about how the lesson needs to be modified for the next cycle. Is it really like this? I would like to know whether teachers felt free in the post-lesson conferences to articulate and discuss their different ways of seeing the object of learning presented in the classroom, and their different understandings of how the teacher should mediate the relationship between the object of learning and the learner (V3). Under these conditions did the teachers arrive at an unforced consensus as a basis for modifying the lesson plan? Or perhaps the outcome is best described in Sankey’s terms as a ‘fusion of horizons’, that acknowledges both similarities and differences in interpretations and perspectives? If so, then what are the appropriate decision procedures for modifying the lesson plan? Are the decision-procedures for effecting such modifications consistent with the application of variation theory to post-lesson conferencing? Is variation theory (3) compatible with the view, which might be embedded in Japanese Lesson Study, that the professional peer group rather than the individual teacher is the primary agent of pedagogical change in the classroom?

Teachers’ experiences of the Learning Study Process
The lesson studies reported in three of the papers in this symposium appear to be understandably very gentle in their treatment of the teachers engaged in the Learning Studies. This is understandable given the fact that the papers are authored by academics from the tertiary institution acting as mediators in the process. I do not doubt the success stories they portray, having myself observed a PIPS Learning Study in action and interviewed teachers and students engaged in a number of others together with the school principals that established the organisational conditions for them to occur. I am convinced that the Lesson Study procedure, when combined with and modified by the use of variation learning theory, establishes conditions that empower teachers to effect pedagogical change in their classrooms, at least in the short term. What perhaps gets toned down in the papers are portrayals of the
dilemmas experienced by individual teachers in the course of their learning studies, of the conflicts and issues that arise within a group and with the academic mediator, and of the struggles to reconcile changes in their practice with the day to day accountabilities that shape the work they are paid to do in their classroom and school. More evidence about teachers’ experiences of lesson study based on interviews would have highlighted these aspects without diminishing these accounts as success stories.

The impact of the academic facilitator
The papers tend to portray the impact of the academic mediator in very modest tones. The extent of their influence over planning decisions is not explored in any great detail. Yet the teachers and principals that I interviewed unanimously testified that the curriculum expertise of the academic facilitator was a critical factor in the success of the Learning Study as a change process. Perhaps some, if not all, of the above issues, concerning the portrayal of Learning Studies, could be resolved through more collaborative writing with the teachers involved.

The impact of Learning Studies over time
My interviews with students, teachers and principals suggested that the impact of Learning Studies on the teaching and learning process was difficult to sustain in the longer term. Both students and teachers cited a tendency for the process to regress back into a traditional form under the day-to-day accountability pressures teachers face in their work. The implementation of Learning Study procedures across a school on a continuous basis is not feasible under the prevailing organisational conditions in schools. It may prove possible to change some of these conditions to increase the accessibility and frequency of Learning Study in schools, but more could also be done to design more flexible procedures to enhance its adaptability to prevailing organisational conditions.

What is an object of learning?
The term ‘object of learning’ is a key term in the vocabulary of Learning Studies, yet it’s use in these papers varied somewhat. At times it was used to refer to something that can be experienced, such as a situation, event, or artefact, while at other times it was used to refer to what the student is intended to learn i.e. to a desired learning outcome. A teacher may intend students to learn a certain fact but this is necessarily a fact about something. So is the ‘object of learning’ in this case what the fact is about? Or is the fact itself? This question is not quibbling about the use of the term. If it’s use is conflated with the use of the term ‘intended learning outcome’ then a phenomenological theory of learning is distorted by being made to fit the behaviouristic theory of learning which currently dominates pedagogy in many parts of the world. The latter implies conditions of learning which give the teacher optimal control over the learning outcomes. The former refers to conditions of learning that enable students to take responsibility for what they learn.

Variation Theory and Learning Study
The papers define Learning Study as the application of variation theory. It is clearly a theory that has the potential to help teachers reflect about the processes of learning and teaching. But do Learning Studies provide a context in which teachers develop a capacity to test the theory in action and thereby contribute to its further refinement and development? Some of the papers depict teachers wrestling with the problems of applying the theory in practice, but could they be involved in reflecting about such problems in a way which highlighted it’s limitations as a theory of learning as well as it’s strengths? Moreover, are there not other learning theories that could be introduced into learning studies, perhaps in combination with variation theory, to serve a similar function; namely to provide an alternative conception of the educational process to the one which underpins traditional pedagogy? Sankey’s paper suggests, for example, that Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory of understanding could be applied to the
teacher conferencing aspect of Learning Studies? Then why could it not also be applied to learning in the classroom? What aspects of learning does it throw light on in comparison with variation theory? There are a number of non-behaviourist theories of learning that might be combined to throw light on the conditions of learning in classrooms and schools?