

SAN04200

## Symposium Title: Learning Study and Teacher's Professional Learning in Hong Kong (SAM04198)

### Teacher Learning and the Art of Professional Conversation

**Derek Sankey**  
**Hong Kong Institute of Education**

***Abstract:***

*Professional conversation is an art. It is different from everyday conversation in that it is situated in practice, in order to understand practice. It involves a high level of interpretation and reinterpretation, and therefore exhibits many hermeneutical characteristics. This paper outlines and discusses some key features of hermeneutics, drawing on the work of one of its most distinguished advocates, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and shows how the model helps to illuminate the kinds of conversations about practice that teachers engage in when conducting Learning Studies. A hermeneutic model is particularly applicable to the pre and post-lesson conferencing, as an example of professional conversation in which all participants are engaged in enhancing their own learning. The paper will argue that in conducting professional conversation and trying to understand each other's point of view, we need to go beyond empathy. Understanding, from a hermeneutic perspective, is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning. Rather, it should be viewed as a fusion of horizons.*

#### **1. Introduction**

Learning study, as practiced in Hong Kong, relies heavily on teachers being able to engage in a professional conversation about their practice. They are required, as part of the action research cycle of Learning Study, to observe the research lesson and then discuss and analyse it in a post-lesson conference, with the lesson teacher and other colleagues comprising the research team. The discussion aims at refining the lesson, such that when it is taught for a second and third time pupil learning will be improved, because the object of learning will be more clearly identified and hence better understood. The process as a whole also aims at enhancing the teachers' professional development. Though each limited case study has merit in its own right, providing insights on how best to teach the chosen topic, the process as a whole is intended to impact on the teachers' future performance when teaching other topics within the curriculum.

The ability of teachers to frame and articulate their ideas in conversation with others is therefore central to the process of Learning Study. However, in keeping with many other models of teacher professional development, the Learning Study projects so far conducted in Hong Kong have largely assumed that teachers' professional conversation is unproblematic. Of course, what teachers say in the conversation in regard to learning and teaching is viewed as problematic, but

the conversation itself has not generally been opened up to scrutiny. We have also been aware that the ability of teachers to engage in discussion varies from person to person, and school to school. To a degree, this may result from differences of personality or the nature of the different topics being discussed. However, as part of the ongoing development of Learning Study, this paper will explore the possibility that it is more than that. It will suggest that teachers' professional conversation *is* problematic and that one main reason for this is the extent to which conversation is an art. A second main reason is that professional conversation plays on interpretation and re-interpretation. As such, it is a hermeneutical activity, and can therefore be analysed and further developed within a hermeneutical framework.

In opening up these issues for further discussion, we will first consider the idea that professional conversation is an art, and that its achievement cannot be taken for granted. In pursuing the notion that professional conversation is a hermeneutical process, we will look particularly at Gadamer's concept of 'fusing horizons'. We will see that this process is especially evident in lesson conferencing, the main form of conversation to be conducted within the context of Learning Study. The paper will then provide a brief introduction to the notion of speech acts, as part of hermeneutic analysis, and consider 'description and commentary' and 'question and answer' as examples of speech acts that commonly occur within lesson conferencing. Finally, we will consider how ideas explored in the paper might be incorporated into the Learning Study cycle.

## ***2. Professional conversation as an art to be developed.***

One of the most obvious ways in which human beings are different from all other species of life on this planet is our ability to communicate through conversation. Many other species communicate, but we are able to do so using spoken and written words, as well as gesture and sign. The origins of writing are fairly well known, but the origins of spoken communication are largely a matter speculation, lost in the mists of time. One thing is certain, however, conversation is a form of human action, subject to the same variations of circumstance and open to the same possibilities as all other human actions. Alasdair MacIntyre goes a step further, pointing out that 'man is in his actions and practice... essentially a story-telling animal' (MacIntyre, 1984, p.216). The art of story-telling can be seen at play in post-lesson conferencing where, as part of Learning Study, the lesson teacher and the colleagues who observed her lesson attempt to reconstruct what happened. As different observers notice different aspects of the lesson, the collective re-telling of what took place is an important ingredient in reconstructing the whole. Furthermore, and at a more subtle level, each teacher has their own professional story that they bring to the discussion, though not always explicitly, which influences what they see in the lesson and what they say about it.

Conversation is also a performance. Professional conversation, like an artistic performance, operates within certain agreed boundaries but is also open to possibilities for innovation. No concert, dance or drama performance simply repeats a previous performance though each are subject to forms of practice that determine what they do and how they do it on any particular occasion, and to what end. Playing an instrument for pleasure at home may contain elements of performance, but is not the same as 'putting on' a performance as part of a professional concert. Similarly, the kind of professional conversation that occurs in relation to Learning Study, for example, is different from everyday conversation. Not only does it have a very specific focus on classroom practice, but also the way in which practice is understood and critiqued inevitably involves considerable theorising. The approach to Learning Study adopted in Hong Kong is situated in the Learning Theory of Variation (Marton and Booth, 1997). That provides the conceptual framework as teachers engage in making sense of what happened in *a particular* classroom with *a particular group* of students. When individual teachers share their thoughts and insights about practice we have the beginnings of professional conversation. But it is only a beginning, because a conversation, by its very nature, is not a procession of voices one after another, but a blending of voices in interactive dialogue.

Within the play of the conversation there needs to be give-and-take, tempered by an intuitive sense of when to speak and when to remain silent to allow another speaker to have her say. This is an art, a skill that may happen as a matter of course, but often does not. For example, there are often dominant voices and these may not always be the ones with the most insightful things to say. Moreover, in many groupings of teachers there may be an implicit pecking order – where status somehow determines who should or should not speak at any given time, especially when someone is perceived to be the 'expert' in the conversational group. This can certainly pose problems within the context of Learning Study when colleagues from the Institute of Education visit schools to help initiate the action research process. Divisions of status and labour remain deeply imbedded in education, particularly at the interface between theory and practice (Kemmis, 1995). There are other potential obstacles to the creation of a productive conversation, including the 'chemistry' of the group and disagreements that may lead to considerable dissension.

These and other factors may not only influence the process of the conversation but also its quality, including the ability of those participating to achieve depth of analysis and insight. There is always a danger that teacher conversation skids across the surface of issues, providing easy answers to difficult questions. This is not necessarily a criticism of teachers' professionalism, though it may indicate an inability to move beyond the confines, perhaps security, of what they have done and thought before. Learning Study is a challenge for such teachers, for it requires them to face the possibility that their past practice in teaching a particular topic may be lacking in

some important respects, especially in the clarity of focus they have previously brought to teaching the topic, through not clearly identifying the object of learning. One important hallmark of a good professional conversation is therefore that it achieves depth of understanding. Another is the extent to which it can be both critical and supportive. And another, the extent to which it provides the teachers with something they can build on and develop. This is crucial in the case of Learning Study, as the criticism of the first and subsequent research lessons aims at improvement, taking it forward into the next action research cycle.

Raising these issues not only helps to illustrate why professional conversation can be viewed as an art, it also serves to emphasise that, like all other arts, it should not be taken for granted. In positioning it as an art, I am pointing to both aspects of the everyday use of that term. First, the notion of art as a skill, the artful participation of teachers in a professional conversation. Second, the idea that professional conversation is a *form* of art, and like music, dance, drama, and painting, it should be both creative and disciplined. Moreover, its performance can always be reviewed, analysed and improved. Improvement does not come from simply repeating the skills over and over again, though that may help. It also requires that those engaging in the art are clear about the processes of the art form, its nature and what it is trying to achieve.

In the case of teachers' professional conversation, I suggest that there is much to be gained from viewing it as a hermeneutical activity, where interpretation, understanding and application go hand in hand. These three constitute the achievement of coming to understand (Gadamer, 1995). The success of teachers' professional conversation may be measured by the extent to which it helps teachers deeply understand their practice and realistically assess the impact they are having on their pupils' learning. In possessing this dual focus, of enhancing pupil learning and contributing to teachers' professional development, the hermeneutic of professional conversation takes its place within the Learning Study process, itself.

### ***3. Hermeneutics and the fusion of horizons.***

For those who are unfamiliar with hermeneutics, the word may sound rather daunting. On the other hand, the English word 'interpretation' would presumably pose no such problems. The word hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word for interpretation ἐρμηνεία – hermenia. Hermeneutics should therefore be understood as theory of interpretation or 'interpretative theory', in much the same way as we have theory of knowledge or 'epistemology' - a term also drawn from Greek. This is a particularly apt comparison of terms because, in the course of its development, hermeneutics challenged many of the central ideas in both the Rationalist and Empiricist theories of knowledge, undermining, some believe, the whole epistemological programme (Rorty, 1979). That programme, from the seventeenth century onwards, had been

built up around the new science. In contrast, the origins of hermeneutics are in the interpretation of ancient texts, especially the Bible.

The main problem when confronted with an ancient text is the distance in time and culture between the text and the present day reader. In early hermeneutics it was believed that one could bridge that gap through a kind of historical empathy. More specifically, in regard to textual criticism, it was believed that if one could recapture what German scholars referred to as the *sitz-im-leben* (life-situation) of the text one could more readily place oneself imaginatively into its original context and so gain a clear sense of the author's meaning. Freidrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) saw the task of hermeneutics as the obliteration of the mediating opinions, traditions and prejudices that separate us from the object of understanding – the text or person that we are attempting to understand.

The assumption that we can transcend our own historical or personal situation and rediscover the meanings of another time, place or person are still found in conservative hermeneutics, for example in the work of E.D. Hirsch (1967). He believes that one can separate the meaning of a text from its significance. The meaning is what is given in the text; its significance is what it says to us. Generally, however, it is accepted that meaning and significance cannot be so easily pulled apart and, moreover, the interpreter's personal and cultural situation provides considerable, if not insuperable, obstacles to bridging the divides of time, place and persons. Furthermore, Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the best known Twentieth Century exponents of hermeneutics, saw that prejudices and traditions should not be obliterated, as Schleiermacher had advocated. On the contrary, prejudice and tradition are the very tools that the interpreter of texts and human actions cannot do without. The starting point of coming to understand, he believed, is the interpreter who is already interested in and *prejudiced* about that which he or she is trying to understand. And, he or she does so from the *vantage point* of standing within traditions.

One problem with this view is that prejudice generally carries very negative connotations. However, Gadamer believed that this is simply a prejudice against prejudice. To be prejudiced does not necessarily imply bigotry, as we often suppose. It simply means being oriented in favour of some position or another prior to considering it as an issue. In that sense we cannot do without prejudice if we are to have any view at all. We are never 'clean slates' or sheets of paper, as John Locke (1632-1704) supposed. We come into the world bearing a genetic imprint, and from birth onwards, if not in the womb, our minds develop as they orient one way and another in response to experience.

Gadamer accounts for this largely in terms of language, which he sees as both limiting our interpretive powers but also providing some degree of access to the meaning of a text or other person. At the level of persons, I suspect that prejudice is neuronally embedded as each self comes into being. It is part of the process of concept formation, which is likely driven by the perceptual apparatus of the brain and therefore, in evolution and in each individual, below the level of consciousness and prior to language. I will not be pursuing that idea in this paper, though I think it is important in suggesting that the problems run deeper than language, while certainly including language. Of more immediate relevance, we need to consider Gadamer's alternative to empathy as a means of bridging the distance of time, place and persons in coming to understand. Or to put it more directly in terms of this paper's focus, how can one individual understand what another is saying in the course of a professional conversation if the prejudices, prejudgement and personal/professional biographies of the two are so different? Gadamer's answer is to invoke the notion of 'fusing horizons'.

We will shortly see how this notion provides considerable insight into what is occurring in a professional conversation when real understanding is being achieved, but first notice the way that this point has been made. I am not positioning the fusion of horizons as a procedural 'method' or norm. Rather, as Gadamer insists, the aim of philosophical hermeneutics is 'not to develop a procedure of understanding but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place' (Gadamer, 1995, p.295). I have suggested that professional conversation is an art, but that is not to say that hermeneutics is an art. As noted earlier, hermeneutics provides a theory of interpretation, a way of accounting for what occurs when different interpretations converge in the process of holding an artful conversation. What occurs, according to Gadamer, is not empathy; rather it should be viewed as a play of interpretations and a fusion of horizons. Roger Lundin put it this way:

To understand another person or a book... one does not put on another's glasses to see the object through entirely different lenses; instead one looks alongside another upon an object of mutual concern and enters into dialogue in search of understanding (Lundin, 1999, p.56).

This nicely captures what I see taking place as teachers engage in dialogue, attempting to understand their practice and the practice of their other colleagues. It is not empathy, because we can never fully escape the limitations of our own horizon and see things from another person's perspective, through their 'lenses'. 'Understanding is always more than merely recreating someone else's meaning' (Gadamer, 1995, p.375).

#### ***4. Learning Study, interpretation and the fusion of horizons.***

Let us now try to unpack these ideas in terms of teachers' engagement in Learning Study. Or to put it in a form of a question, what has hermeneutics got to do with teachers' professional conversation in the context of Learning Study? There are two main points to be explored, which will be considered in turn.

1. Prejudice as a horizon with enabling potential for creating productive professional conversations in the context of Learning Study;
2. Professional conversation and the hermeneutical circle - a play of interpretation and re-interpretation, leading to a fusion of horizons.

Earlier in the paper we mentioned the professional stories or biographies that teachers bring to their conversations about practice. We can extend this idea by saying that, as teachers, we come to our practice and attempt to understand it from our own particular vantage-point, with many preconceptions, biases, past experience, present understandings and expectations, knowledge and skills. This constitutes our horizon. Or, as Gadamer put it: 'The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point' (Gadamer, 1995, p.302), in our case, the vantage point of the individual teacher. We can envisage that individual horizon surrounding each teacher as she or he comes to the conversation. Like all horizons, it is both limited but also changing and fluid. Within the context of the Learning Theory of Variation, which underpins Learning Study in Hong Kong this is partly acknowledged in what we refer to as Variation (V) 2.

Teachers have daily encounters with students, and from these experiences, they are able to build up a good knowledge base about the different ways that students deal with particular concepts or phenomena, as well as a working knowledge of how to bring about the object of learning to handle these differences in the lesson....

The variation in teachers' ways of understanding and dealing with particular objects of learning can be tapped by providing opportunities for teachers and researchers to share their ideas in preparation meetings before the research lesson, by observing team members teach their research lessons, and by post-lesson conferences. (Lo, et.al.)

The reference here is to the kind of knowledge, often held tacitly, that teachers bring to their practice and which is sometimes called "personal practical knowledge" (Elbaz, 1983 and Connelly and Clandinin, 1995) or "pedagogical content knowledge" (Shulman,1986). This certainly contributes to the teacher's horizon, but it is only a part of it. In regard to the pupils and what they bring to their lesson, the idea of pupils' prior knowledge and understandings are accounted for in what we call Variation (V) 1. I suggest that, as with pupils, the teachers' prior understandings relate to the total range of interpretations that they bring to any particular topic. For teachers, that may include how best to teach a topic, as in pedagogical content knowledge, but more significantly it incorporates the meanings that they attach to the object of understanding.

Any single topic may carry many meanings, some of which may be more prominent for some teachers than for others. Moreover, some teacher's concepts may be richer in content than others, and some teacher's concepts may simply be wrong. Furthermore, teachers may inhabit different traditions of thought and practice when approaching a lesson and these may bear significantly on how they view the topic and what they see as important when discussing a lesson taught on that topic. For example, the extent to which teachers' ideas may be informed by values of one kind or another, or by religious or philosophical presuppositions. A realist will teach the 'periodic table' with different assumptions from that of a positivist, and this may make a big difference to how each teacher answers a pupil's enquiry about the status of the periodic table as knowledge.

Employing the notion of 'horizon', therefore reminds us of the individuality of each teacher in terms of the prejudices, biases and presuppositions that they bring to their teaching, even as it acknowledges that there may be much that is jointly shared because of their shared culture and language. On that basis and in the process of trying to understand, teachers may become aware of those prejudices that are roadblocks to understanding, and those that enable them to understand. 'In fact the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices' (Gadamer, 1995, p.306). By sifting our prejudices, and engaging with the object of understanding, we begin to forge what Gadamer calls a *fusion of horizons*, between our horizon, the object of understanding and the horizons of other members of the research team.

The notion of fusing horizons brings us to the second point to be considered in this section of the paper. If each person's horizon is pictured as a circle, the fusion of horizons might appear as the overlapping circles of a Venn diagram. However, this analogy should not be confused with the notion of the 'hermeneutical circle', which is often used to describe the play of interpretation and reinterpretation in the process of fusing horizons. That notion, however, suggests a rather self enclosed process. A better metaphor might be an upward spiral, incorporating progression. For each participant in the professional conversation, the act of reinterpretation begins as he or she examines his or her prior understandings in the process of listening to the views of others. Differences and similarities of opinion provide opportunities for reinterpretation that may result, for each participant, in a revised interpretation and a changed and perhaps enlarged horizon. The fusion of these personal fluid horizons, one with another, will never be complete, the circles of the Venn diagram never entirely overlapping, but in a productive and artful conversation, the movement of interpretation and reinterpretation will be upwardly progressive, as each horizon of understanding is modified through the sharing of meanings, understandings and potential applications.



But one may ask: why all the talk about different personal horizons, are there not also matters of ‘fact’ rather than opinion in a professional conversation? And are we to assume that each opinion or interpretation of a lesson is as good as any other? This brings us back to the purpose of a professional conversation. Leaving aside that matters of fact are never entirely independent of interpretation, if there are ‘facts’ that are agreed by all members of the research team, then presumably they can simply be acknowledged. For the most part, however, the conversation will not be concerned with rehearsing ‘fact’ but in trying to *interpret* what happened in a lesson and make sense of what may seem confusing. It is precisely this hermeneutical (interpretative) dimension in trying to understand practice, which gives the professional conversation its significance. However, the strong emphasis being placed on interpretation does not mean that ‘anything goes’. As Paul Ricoeur reminds us:

It is always possible to argue for and against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our immediate reach (Ricoeur, 1976, p.79).

To deny this is to finish up in what Stanley Fish (1980) referred to as ‘interpretive communities’ in which competing traditions stand alongside each other with no hope of judging one against the other in terms of their value or truth content. By contrast, I have previously argued that:

There is no touchstone of truth, no one true account of an observed lesson, for example, but there are differences in the quality of interpretations and in their truth content. Some interpretations are conceptually richer, better informed, more intellectually rigorous, more elegant, less contrived and thus more able to aid understanding and yield greater truth. And it is against the background of established tradition and authority that these differences of quality, and differences in truth content, will inevitably be hammered out in the process of hermeneutical conversation (Sankey, 2004, p.7).

### ***5. Speech acts and the performative use of language***

Just as there is no such thing as content-less learning, a professional conversation has to have an object. It has to be a conversation about something. Within hermeneutics, the units of a text may be broken down into what are called speech acts. The idea, which in its recent form may be traced back to Wittgenstein, is that language is performative. Thus, to understand the meaning of a word or utterance, we need to examine its performative role and how it takes its place within the surrounding context of human action. When applied to a post-lesson conference, we need to take account of the context of practice and talk about practice within the participants’ school and, moreover, within the larger education community of Hong Kong, with its previous and current attempts to reform the curriculum and classroom practice, if we are to appreciate the meanings that teachers convey to each other. These and other contexts *situate* the conversation and hence the *understandings* hammered out in the process of discussion.

The concept of *situated understanding* (Elliott, 1993) requires that practice has to be understood from the inside, in terms of the interpretations placed on situations by those that experience them. This is achieved by engaging with the prejudices and biases brought to the conversation and by modifying them through critical reflection and insight, individually and collaboratively, before applying them back into practice. Thus, as John Elliott notes, ‘the aim of reflection... is to enable practitioners to improve the quality of their decisions by developing situational understanding that makes best sense of the available evidence’ (ibid., p. 69f). The idea that practice cannot be understood without reference to the self-understandings, the biases and prejudices of the actors, is, as Kemmis observes, diametrically opposed to the ‘objectivist’ view of behaviourist psychology, that practice should be viewed with methodological detachment from outside and ‘without reference to the self-understandings of the actors’ (Kemmis 1995, p.6).

Within any given post-lesson conference, there will be various kinds of speech acts, including description, commentary, questions, answers, judgements, recommendations, and so forth. In the process of deconstructing the lesson, these can be opened up to analysis by observing the role that they played in the conversation, and the meanings they carried or that were constructed in the act of speaking. We will briefly consider description and commentary, question and answer.

#### *1. Description and commentary.*

Description and commentary will likely form the backbone of the post-lesson conference. Description will normally provide the main story-line, recounting what occurred in the lesson. Commentary will go a step further in providing ‘comment’ on specific events. Both require awareness; though in the case of commentary the awareness of what occurred will be supplemented by explanation, and perhaps analysis. This demands a high level of conscious attention. Indeed Lawrence Weiskrantz (1997) has argued that the ability to provide a commentary on events is a defining characteristic of consciousness.

Though different, descriptions and commentaries both tend to be situated in and responsive to the observations made during the lesson. This should alert us to an important perceptual/hermeneutical point. There was a time when observation was conceived as mainly an act of seeing, as light images reaching the retinas of our eyes produced visual images in the brain. Observation was therefore assumed to provide a firm empirical base for knowledge and understanding. It is now widely appreciated, however, that observation is not simply an act of sensing. Rather it is an act of mind in which light images are *interpreted* through the filters of our past experiences, present understandings and future expectations. So, observation has a hermeneutical dimension.

What this means is that a team of teachers viewing the same lesson, perhaps within the context of Learning Study, may well see different things, even though the light images reaching their eyes are much the same. At the very least, it cannot be assumed they all saw the same thing when looking at precisely the same event, or that they gave the same weightings to what they saw. Therefore the acts of describing or commenting on what was observed inevitably include a personal perspective on events, however much the actors attempt to be fair and 'objective'. Or to put this in terms of Learning Study theory, we can say that commentaries relate the visual awareness of what occurred in the lesson (what was observed) to the discriminative awareness of what was seen as important or not so important (how the lesson in part or as a whole was interpreted and valued). Moreover, the visual and discriminative awarenesses differ from person to person.

## *2. Question and answer.*

Within the context of everyday conversation we often ask questions in order to gain information. That may also be the case in a professional conversation, though it will usually not predominate. More often, the act of asking a question will be an *invitation to reflect*, for example on what should constitute the object of learning for a given lesson, on the extent to which an observed lesson met its aim of enhancing pupils learning, or on how best to redesign the lesson. The invitation to reflect is contextually situated - both practically and theoretically. The questions asked, if they are to be meaningful, must, as noted earlier, relate to the contexts of the actual classroom and school, and the curriculum context of learning. They will also, inevitably, carry certain theoretical presuppositions. A question such as 'were the pupils all paying attention' carries the theoretical assumption that 'paying attention' has a bearing on the achievement of pupil learning. Without that assumption it would be no more relevant than asking whether all the pupils were observed to have brown eyes, at a particular stage in the lesson. Moreover, the theory informing the teacher's presupposition may be contested, as in the case cited.

If we are to understand the meanings conveyed by the answers, we also need to consider their performative role in the context of the situation in which they are given. Primarily they are responses that are deliberative, in the sense that they provide insight and perspective while also being reasoned and related to context. However, this raises an important point, for it may be that this context is misunderstood by the person answering, or is variously understood by the individual participants in the conversation. It cannot be assumed, therefore, that the answer carries the same meaning for each participant. That can only be established, if at all, by deconstructing the conversation, clarifying the performative act and analysing the meanings conveyed.

## *6. Conclusion*

If the argument of this paper is anywhere near the mark, a main reason why some teachers in some schools are better able to converse about their practice than others is not simply matters of personality, the nature of the school, or the topic they are discussing, though these may play a part. A more important reason is that a professional conversation is a form of human artistry, involving participants in a play of interpretation and reinterpretation. The hermeneutical dimension both limits but also enables the success of the conversation. I am not, of course, claiming that teachers generally realise this to be the case. Far from it, but then from a hermeneutical perspective, where the aim is to describe rather than prescribe, whether a professional conversation is essentially hermeneutical is not dependant on the participants realising it to be so. However, on the other hand, if it is realised to be hermeneutical, the conversation can be analysed and potentially improved.

What implications might this paper have for the practice and theory of Learning Study? First, problematising teacher's professional conversations, especially in the context of post-lesson conferencing, would open up the possibility of examining meanings more systematically. The assumption that we know the meaning of what is being said by simply hearing the words spoken is not sustainable. One suspects that teachers are sometimes talking past each other, and perhaps assuming consensus when it does not exist. Asking the question 'what do you mean' may expose a range of pre-understandings, not to mention prejudices, that are informing the meanings of what is being said, and those meanings may themselves be problematic.

In terms of the Learning Theory of Variation, the case was made earlier that teachers' pre-understandings should be given more focus, as part of what is meant by V2. It is not simply pedagogical content knowledge that teachers bring to the Learning Study, more significantly, according to hermeneutic theory, they are bringing prejudices and preconceptions that impact on how they teach a topic and how they subsequently analyse it. These should be teased out, as far as possible, as part of the preliminary discussion and subsequent post-lesson analysis.

Third, but building on the first two points, hermeneutics can be drawn into the framework of Learning Study as a means to analyse a professional conversation. In other words, as part of the research cycle and in writing up the case study, focus should be given to the play of interpretation and reinterpretation, the dynamics of the discussion, in addition to highlighting the results of the teacher conversations in terms of problems identified and solutions suggested and acted on. Analysing the recorded school-based discussions, in regard to the play of interpretation and the way meanings are being established, would enrich each case study. If teachers participating in the Learning Study were to apply this technique reflexively onto their own conversations they would need to understand the hermeneutic framework sufficiently to ask these questions, and that may

be seen as an impediment. On the other hand, if the hermeneutic dimension were incorporated into the Learning Theory of Variation, as I believe it is implicitly, the difficulties of comprehension would not be greatly increased.

Moreover, at the start of the Learning Study and as a preliminary to the first discussion, teachers could be asked individually and confidentially to set down their preconceptions about a topic as a paper exercise. This would serve two useful purposes. It would mean that teachers examine their present ideas about the topic, probing their current preconceptions and perhaps misconceptions or more like semi-conceptions, and how they have taught that topic in the past. That would raise awareness that their preconceptions are indeed preconceptions and maybe even disabling prejudices of one kind and another. In practice, it would also assist the opening discussion, giving teachers something to talk about as they exchange their provisional ideas. This would be particularly helpful in those settings where teachers might otherwise find it hard to get conversation going.

A paper exercise might also assist in the post-analysis of the teachers' conversations, focusing on the play of interpretations and the creation of meanings. In this way it will not only be the pupils learning that is pre-tested and post-tested, but also the teachers' learning, in charting how they moved from one level of awareness, one set of presuppositions, to another. This process would be greatly aided if analysing the recorded conversations throughout the Learning Study was built into the overall process of analysis, so that it became part of the evidence.

Finally, the result of opening up the hermeneutical dimension, both in practice and in theory, would contribute to the professional development of the teacher participants. It would heighten their analytical skills and that in turn would feed back into their lesson preparation. Thus the object of learning for any given lesson, pupils' pre and post-lesson tests, and the teachers' prior and post-understandings would be brought together, providing a holistic study of the relationship between the enhancement of pupil learning and teacher professional development. And that, of course, is what Learning Study is about. However, weaving the ideas explored in this paper into the theoretical framework of Learning Study is yet to be undertaken, applying the ideas in practice has yet to be tested.

## References:

- Connelly, M. & Clandinin, D. (1995). Teachers' Professional Knowledge Landscapes: Secret, Sacred, and Cover Stories. In Clandinin, D. & Connelly, M. *Teachers' Professional Knowledge Landscapes*. New York: Columbia University, Teachers College, 3-15.
- Elbaz, F. (1983). *Teacher Thinking: A Study of Practical Knowledge*. London: Croom Helm.
- Elliott, J (ed) *Reconstructing Teacher Education: Teacher Development*, London: Falmer Press, 1993.
- Fish, S. (1980). *Is there a text in this class?: The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University press.
- Gadamer, H. (1975). *Truth and method*. New York: Seabury.
- Gadamer, H. (1995). *Truth and method*. (2nd ed.). New York: Continuum.
- Gallagher, S. (1992). *Hermeneutics and education*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Hirsch, E. D. (1967). *Validity in interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University press.
- Kemmis, S. (1995). Theorising educational practice. In W. Carr (Ed.), *For education: Towards critical educational inquiry* (pp. 2-17). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Lo, M L., Pong, W Y., & Chik, P M. (Eds.). (In press). *For each and everyone: catering for individual differences through learning studies*. HK: HKU press.
- Lunwin. R., Walhout, C. & Thiselton, A. *The promise of hermeneutics*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.
- Marton, F. & Booth, S. (1997). *Learning and awareness*. Mahwah, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Nortre Dame Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1976). *Interpretation theory: Discourse and the surplus of meaning*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1979). *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sankey, D. (2004). The hermeneutics of teaching and lesson conferencing. *Journal of Basic Education* 13.2.
- Schulman, L. (1986). *Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching*. *Educational Researcher*, 15(2), 4-14.
- Weiskrantz L. (1997). *Consciousness lost and found: A neuropsychological exploration*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.