

Developing Lesson Conferencing Skills

A set of materials designed for use in primary schools to support school-based staff development, where the focus is on lesson observation and pre and post-lesson conferencing.

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Preface

In recent years, teachers in Hong Kong have been faced with many changes, which have largely been imposed upon them. The majority of these changes have focused on curriculum innovation and teachers have been expected to accept major alterations to the content of their teaching and also change their inherent beliefs. The result, in most schools, has been a veneer of acceptance of each new initiative, as teachers assimilated the superficial elements. For the most part, their way of coping has been to tack on some of the new ideas, while retaining their traditional classroom behaviour.

What has been lacking in these often worthy attempts to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools, has been a focus on influencing the culture of Hong Kong schools. There has been little or no attempt to help all teachers in individual schools develop their levels of professional responsibility and confidence or enable them to understand the reasons for such drastic change, such that they gradually alter their lesson content and teaching methods in a supportive collegial environment.

At the same time, Hong Kong teachers, as in most other places, have been slow to open their doors and encourage colleagues to share and discuss their classroom experiences. In Hong Kong schools this has been further hindered by the fact that teachers have few opportunities to discuss professional issues in informal settings. Hong Kong staffrooms are places where teachers sit and mark skyscraper high columns of books, not rooms where colleagues can relax for ten minutes with a cup of tea and become involved in professional dialogue.

When teacher appraisal and peer review were first introduced, the majority of teachers viewed them with fear and trepidation. Far from being seen as an attempt to help teachers improve the quality of their work, they were viewed by most teachers as assessment - summative assessment rather than formative and developmental. It should be very clear to everyone involved in using these materials that the aim is get away from the scenario where teachers sit in judgement on one another. Rather, they aim to provide an opportunity for teachers to engage in supportive learning experiences, involving both the appraisers and the teacher being appraised. In that way all colleagues in schools can develop professionally to the benefit of everyone, particularly the children in the school.

I very much hope that you will find these materials professionally challenging and useful.

Jenny Tyrrell.

Primary education specialist. Author of *The Power of Fantasy in Early Learning* (2001)

The Learning Community Model

A lesson conference is a structured professional conversation, aimed at analysing a lesson and improving teaching and student learning. It is often used in the contexts of mentoring and peer-review, and when conducting learning studies. The approach to lesson conferencing in this pack employs a notion of professional conversation, where:

- *schools are viewed as learning communities; and*
- *all involved in the professional conversation are considered potential learners, no matter how experienced they may be as teachers.*

This view of professional conversation changes the way lesson conferencing is conceived when conducted as part of mentoring and peer-review. The learning community model of mentoring contrasts with the rather top-down ‘transmission’ model, where the mentor acts as councillor and expert critical friend, handing down advice to the mentee. It also contrasts with the ‘supervisory’ model of peer review, where the main purpose of observing a lesson is to provide the reviewer with the evidence upon which he or she can provide a well informed, ‘neutral’ judgement of the merits of the lesson.

The ‘learning community’ model accepts that mentors may well provide counselling support and may have much accumulated wisdom to pass on to beginning teachers, and that mentors and peer reviewers have to make informed judgements regarding professional competence. Nevertheless, when professional conversation is conceived as a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas, as in the learning community model, it will usually not be one-to-one, as in the more traditional approaches to mentoring and peer-review. Ideally, it will involve a number of participants, perhaps the mentor or peer reviewer along with other experienced teachers. Having multiple voices in the conversation not only safeguards against possible mentor or peer-reviewer bias; it opens up the conversation to the possibility of teachers professionally learning from one another, in exchanging views and negotiating meanings. All who participate may therefore be viewed as learners, even as they also possess professional expertise.

Users of the materials will notice, however, that some of the video clips show examples of one-to-one conversation, reflecting the widespread use of that practice. In each case, the exercises that follow the video extracts invite users to provide the multiple voices that are missing in the video clips.

Lesson observation and conferencing, from the perspective of the learning community model, place a particular emphasis on pupil learning; not simply teacher performance. Indeed, whether the pupils have learnt anything and whether what they learnt was worth learning, plus the strategies used to bring about learning, provide the main basis on which comments about teacher performance should be made.

Hence, this pack of materials not only covers generic skills of lesson conferencing, it also aims to develop skills within the broader context of lesson observation and professional debate, where the main focus is on enhancing pupil learning.

Professional Notice

The video materials produced as part of this pack are for training purposes only.

The teachers appearing in the videos, many of whom were novice teachers at the time of filming, have kindly consented to the selected extracts of video being shown on the understanding that they are used solely to assist in the training of lesson conferencing skills. As the video material was mostly filmed in 2001, the teachers who were novices at the time have now gained considerable experience. Some hold positions of responsibility in their school.

All video sequences have been selected because they exhibit some positive aspects of professional lesson conferencing practice. None have been selected as purely negative examples, though viewers are invited to consider what might be changed or improved. That is the proper purpose of using the video clips.

However, viewers must bear in mind that the video sequences provide only a portion of the whole teaching and lesson conferencing event, which has been extracted from the much broader context in which the practice that is seen was originally situated. Without that broader context, viewers should not attempt to make anything other than provisional judgements about the merits of what they see. Moreover, viewers must constantly remember that the filming process itself may have strongly influenced what occurred.

It is the professional responsibility of all who use these materials to fully respect the professional standing of the teachers appearing in the videos. The producers of the pack are most grateful for the generosity of all who allowed us to use video of their practice, without which the pack could not have been produced.

Introduction

Developing Lesson Conferencing Skills

Developing Lesson Conferencing Skills is a pack of materials, containing a CD and workshop guide, that aims to promote school-based teacher development in Hong Kong primary schools. The materials were produced as part of the Progressive and Innovative Primary Schools (PIPS) Project, conducted by the Hong Kong Institute of Education from 2001-2004 and sponsored by the Hong Kong Quality Education Fund.

Mentoring novice teachers, peer review and conducting learning studies in schools are key strategies for initiating and enhancing school-based teacher development. Each involves lesson observation and conferencing and, though the contexts are different, the skills required are often much the same. The ability of teachers to make perceptive observations and provide helpful feedback to their colleagues is a key attribute of professional competence.

Pre and post-lesson conferences should aim at providing insightful, critical but also supportive comment. The materials help to foster that aim through reflection on video sequences that provide miniature case vignettes of practice. The main aim, when viewing these sequences, is to *encourage teachers to review their own thinking and practice in the light of their observations and reflections on the filmed examples*. The two main objectives of the pack are to:

1. Offer guidance for teachers in developing their skills of lesson observation and pre and post-lesson conferencing;
2. Encourage teachers to engage in co-operative and professionally challenging development activities with other colleagues in their school, through reflection on short case examples of lesson observation and conferencing.

The approach adopted in these materials respects the professionalism of teachers. It rejects the view that teachers have to be constantly told what to think and do. Those who work in classrooms on a day to day basis are best placed to comment on classroom practice. What they need is time and encouragement to stand back from the day to day pressures, so that they can reflect on their practice in conversation with their colleagues. The exercises in this kit of materials are designed to encourage such reflection, helped by questions that hint at where issues for further debate may possibly arise. Having tried these materials with many hundreds of teachers on mentoring courses, when the materials were being produced, we have no doubt about the ability of Hong Kong teachers to produce well considered, insightful responses to the questions and issues raised.

General Guidelines

Notes for Users and Facilitators

Who is this package for?

This set of materials is designed for use in primary schools to support school-based staff development where the focus is on lesson observation and pre and post-lesson conferencing. *Although the materials will be of particular benefit to mentors, peer reviewers and supervisors, all teachers can benefit from engaging in critical debate about teaching and learning.* This is particularly evident when groups of teachers engage in learning studies. But simply imagining oneself in the role of the mentor or peer reviewer can help in discussing important issues of learning and teaching, taking the discussion beyond the passing of evaluative criticism to suggesting possible solutions and alternative strategies.

The concrete and local nature of these materials makes them particularly suitable for use in assisting staff development activities in Hong Kong primary schools. The materials are written so that they speak directly to the participants in the school-based development sessions, especially those acting as facilitators of the sessions.

How can the materials best be used?

The materials are arranged in Units, with each Unit providing a range of issues to be explored around a central theme.

It is not intended that schools work their way through the Units one by one, though if they choose to do so they will find a progressive development from the first Unit to the last, and some cross referencing is given across Units.

In previewing the materials it should be noted that Units 1 and 2 are particularly important in establishing a number of generic conferencing skills that are employed in Units 3-9. If there is a only time for one staff development session using this pack, facilitators may consider using sections from different Units (particularly 1 and 2) to make up their own Unit, tailored to the needs of their own school.

Schools are encouraged to use the material in ways that will best meet their own staff development needs.

- To that end, it is best that the person facilitating the workshop session becomes familiar with both the content and style of the materials well in advance of their use. That allows for more *careful selection of those sections that are most appropriate to the school's particular*
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needs, and a careful consideration of how they can best be introduced in the actual school setting. The facilitator therefore needs to be given sufficient quality time during working hours to prepare for the session.

- The timings given for the activities in each Unit are only for guidance. Facilitators are encouraged to set the timings to suit the needs of their own participants. The total timing for each Unit has been set at around two and a half hours, on the assumption that it may be completed in a morning or afternoon staff development workshop session. Facilitators should note that additional suggestions are given in *italics* where it is thought they may help with the planning.
- No staff development programme can be truly comprehensive. The activities suggested in each Unit provide opportunities for teachers to discuss the issues raised by the video and so deepen their thinking and enhance their skills. The activities help to structure the workshop session, providing a focus, but ***schools are encouraged to consider whether there may be better, or additional, activities that can be devised to suit their own needs.*** Indeed, we hope that the activities provided will serve as a model for teachers to develop their own versions relevant to their own school situation. The confidence to do this will increase as you become familiar with the pack.

Logos and boxes

The following logos have been used throughout the manual to help facilitators quickly identify where they are in the sequence of each Unit.

-  Explanations including introductions and video descriptions
 -  Objectives
 -  Preparation for viewing
 -  Watching video sequences and the video time
 -  Preliminary notes
 -  Small group discussion
 -  Whole group sharing
 -  Individual brainstorming
-

Using the Video sequences

- The purpose of each video sequence is to encourage personal reflection and help initiate group discussion. It is therefore not a good use of valuable staff development time to show the video sequences with only minimal follow-up activity. The most important aspect of the workshop is the discussion, which should be lively, reflective and open-ended.
 - By reflecting on the examples of practice provided in the video, participants are encouraged to consider the merits of what they are viewing and how it could be improved. The video sequences provide a starting point for positive and constructive discussion. ***It is important not to fall into the trap of simply criticizing what you see in a negative way***, as this is not a productive basis on which to build a professional conversation. ***We should always be aware that it is easier to talk about practice than to do it.***
 - Facilitators may consider whether to show a video clip for a second time, after holding an initial discussion on a first showing. This often helps to sharpen up the observation of what is actually occurring in the incidents being shown.
 - In some of the Units, an observation checklist is provided to help focus the viewing and the ensuing discussion. In other Units, facilitators may choose to design their own checklists, as these can help to avoid problems that might occur if one or two participants provide instant (and perhaps negative) reactions to what they have seen. Comments of that kind can divert the group's attention from the purpose of the video and so distort the discussion.
 - Facilitators are ***strongly advised not to start any workshop session by simply turning on the video.*** In each Unit, suggestions are made on preparing to watch the video, and these are linked to the objectives for that session. The way that the session is 'set up' will influence how well it continues, and how well it is received by the participating group.
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