Researching Planning in Elementary Social Studies 
in the Digital Age: Exploring the Potential of Lesson Study 
to Energize Teachers and Revitalize a Field

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Abstract: This article reports on the use of Lesson Study as a professional practice and as a form of professional development in the USA. It explores the context of American education and research on instructional planning in order to offer reasons why Lesson Study has not been adopted more widely in social studies education despite documented student success in schools using Lesson Study in other curricular areas. It suggests that researcher and teacher educator collaboration is key to making research-based findings on children's thinking important to teachers as they plan instruction. It proposes that Internet-based professional communities can provide social studies teachers, teacher educators, and researchers with colleagues, and a place, to have Lesson Study - like conversations about effective teaching of social studies in today's world with today's children.

In the United States of America, public schools are under immense pressure to improve the academic performance of their students. In many ways this is a perennial situation, reaching back into the early years of the twentieth century. However, recent events make this a particularly interesting historical moment. Millions of Americans are seeing their standard of living decrease as the gap between the wealthy and the poor increases. They are seeing cities decay and public services such as libraries and schools disappear. At the same time they are becoming aware that events in countries far from their shores shape their daily lives, and that there are rising numbers of people living middle class lives in countries that were once merely names on unstudied maps.

Without dwelling on the multitude of contextual issues that make many proposed solutions simplistic, there are calls for educators to solve the problems of American society and its economy by improving the quality of high school graduates. International measurements of student achievement, such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), rocked the American educational establishment. Videotapes of mathematics classrooms that revealed marked differences in teaching quality were particularly troubling. Researchers who published TIMSS findings fanned the flames of national anxiety in a
number of publications, including a book for the popular press provocatively entitled *The Teaching Gap: Best Ideas from the World's Teachers for Improving Education in the Classroom* (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999).

What the rapid changes in America’s political, social and economic landscape reflect best, however, is the reality that many of its citizens have not been acting as informed and active participants in the democratic processes that are crucial to a vibrant democracy. Although the main focus of official attention and funding has been in the curriculum areas of literacy and numeracy, the calls for change are a call to action for those of us passionate about the importance of our subject area, social studies. Effective social studies instruction helps students understand their crucial role in a democracy.

Leaders in American educational research and teacher education have stated that offering high quality professional development and nourishing strong professional learning communities, as other nations do, will begin to address America’s educational problems (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Lieberman & Mace, 2010). Japan’s Lesson Study is one of the models of professional development being promoted as a route to improving teacher quality. Results on standardized tests from Californian schools that have adopted Lesson Study as a model of professional development are impressive (Lewis, Perry, Hurd, & O’Connell, 2006). However, many of the researchers who have provided leadership in schools adopting Lesson Study as a form of professional development have cautioned that U.S. teachers may inappropriately alter the focus of the practice if not coached to do otherwise (Lewis, Perry & Murata, 2006). These researchers believe that teachers might focus on the surface features of the lesson, such as teacher actions and procedures, rather than on student learning. This is not surprising because the tradition of lesson planning in the U.S. is based on lesson formats that have helped generations of student teachers anticipate the teaching procedures and materials they will use, but have not required them to consider students’ prior knowledge, experiences, or the contexts in which they are learning. These latter characteristics of the teaching situation are especially important in social studies because effective social studies instruction helps students make connections to their lives outside school.

In this paper I offer insights into the culture of teaching and planning in American elementary schools that illustrate why implementing Lesson Study, with its emphasis on student learning, has not been, and will not be, as straight-forward as it may seem on the surface. In analyzing the state of research on and current practices in social studies and in lesson planning in U.S. elementary schools, it becomes clear that the Internet can provide social studies teachers with a virtual community in which Lesson Study - like activities can take place. Such activity has the potential of not only improving social studies instruction but also revitalizing research in social studies education.

THE LESSON PLAN AS PROFESSIONAL ARTIFACT

The lesson plan as proposed by educational psychologist Ralph Tyler (1949) and
expanded upon by Bloom (1956) has been portrayed and critiqued as a linear set of procedures to be undertaken by the teacher, within a given time frame, without deviation from the written outline, and without regard for particular students. Despite that, it has proved to be remarkably durable, a constant feature of teacher preparation courses for decades. Perhaps this is because, despite its flaws, it can be useful, flexible, and an acceptable venue for sharing teaching ideas. For instance the traditional lesson plan format easily allows goals and objectives formulated by the current standards movement to be slotted into it (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2000; Marzano & Kendall, 2006). More importantly, it is a mechanism for articulating instructional decisions at a temporal and spatial distance from the lesson site. Clark and Dunn (1991) advised that lesson plans are evidence of teachers’ efforts to develop a coherent system of activities that will foster the evolution of their students’ cognitive structures. As such, they reflect teachers’ creativity and their ability to apply theories of learning and instruction to their teaching situation.

Lesson plans, as written documents, lend themselves to analysis. They are commonly collected and analyzed, and their contents triangulated with other sources of data in qualitative studies of school practices. They can also be analyzed as a particularly rich form of “pedagogical text” (Linné, 2001), using theories from psychology and sociology (Panasuk & Sullivan, 1998), or using discourse analysis as a heuristic (Au, 2009). Calling on Gee’s (2005) conception of discourse analysis, Au explained that people use language to express meaning, engage with others, convey a particular identity, reveal relationships, represent a particular perspective, indicate connections or relationships between things, and demonstrate knowledge of a particular sign system. Au used this taxonomy to deconstruct and analyze social studies lesson plans published by the educational advocacy group, Rethinking Schools. This organization has goals similar to those espoused by many social studies educators: “Classrooms can be places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make that vision a reality” (Rethinking Schools, 2011).

LESSON PLANNING AS A PROFESSIONAL ACT

Researchers of teachers’ decision-making in the 1970’s and 1980’s discounted the value of lesson plans as typically written and assessed in teacher preparation programs; however they asserted that master teachers do plan their classroom instruction. Using research designs such as teacher “think aloud” activities, they determined that teachers did not plan in the linear fashion suggested by the format of traditional lesson plans. Instead they played with ideas prior to writing them down, often starting with an activity rather than a learning objective in mind (Clark & Peterson, 1986). In McCutcheon’s (1980) study of how elementary teachers plan their core subjects, participants wrote minimal notes in their lesson plan books, which the researcher likened to shopping lists, and they added to their notes throughout the school day. McCutcheon suggested that these types of planning
documents were highly personal and individualistic and that the intended reader was the writer her/himself rather than anyone else. She pointed out that the plans that teachers left for substitute teachers were much more comprehensive. They would usually write out lessons that would be easy for their substitute teacher to teach and manage. She noted that elementary teachers in her study tended not to write long-term or yearly plans. Instead they would refer to the scope and sequence of their textbooks.

The casual nature of elementary planning has been noted by other researchers. Kagan and Tippins (1992) disconnected completion of a particular lesson plan structure from course grades in their teacher preparation program. Instead, they encouraged student teachers to modify their lesson plans across the duration of their student teaching semester in schools to best meet their needs. Disconcertingly, over time the plans of student teachers placed in elementary schools became increasingly brief and idiosyncratic, and they provided little evidence of attention to substantive content. It has been argued that young teachers learn how to teach in their field experiences in teacher preparation. If so, it would seem that this would be the time when lesson plans would be most highly scrutinized. If the finding is not an artifact of the research method (i.e., collaborating teachers were deliberately asked not to question their student teachers’ planning), this study suggests either that lesson plans are not scrutinized and critiqued by collaborating teachers during student teaching, or that it is professionally acceptable to write idiosyncratic lesson plans that do not address content in meaningful ways, revealing a lack of conversation around planning. Also, if young teachers are not communicating with their senior colleagues around planning in substantive ways when they are student teachers, it is unlikely that they will do so when they have their own classrooms. They may have no choice but to rely on what they learned about teaching in their “apprenticeship of observation.”

Educational sociologist Daniel Lortie (1975) coined the phrase “apprenticeship of observation” to explain how much of what teachers learn about how to teach happens when they are students in the classroom, from observing how their own teachers act. If instructional planning is essential to effective teaching, then the apprenticeship of observation is problematic. Students have access to the products of teachers’ planning, i.e., they witness the instruction, but they do not see their teachers as they plan, or as they reflect on lessons they have taught. If there is no community of practice (see Lave & Wenger, 2001) in which young teachers can watch and listen as their professional elders mindfully plan and reflect on classroom instruction, the burden of lesson planning falls on the individual young teacher. Such isolation when it comes to an essential professional activity has unfortunate consequences. More than 50% of all public school teachers in the United States leave the profession within the first five years of teaching. Many cite a sense of isolation from colleagues and administrators as their reason (Abdullah, 2009; Borman & Dowling, 2008). This constant movement of members from the professional community in turn hinders the growth of a coherent shared knowledge base, such as the one that is created by Lesson Study in Japan (Lewis, Perry & Murata, 2006).

Clearly, the organization of teachers’ relationships in the United States reflects an institutionalized culture of teaching oriented towards single teachers with idiosyncratic
stances rather than towards teachers as a collective group with shared professional interests. In countries such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and China, planning is an integral part of a teacher’s day and an activity undertaken largely within a professional community (Kang & Hong, 2008). In the United States lesson planning, like teaching, is an individual practice. Teachers have from three to five hours of their work week assigned to lesson planning and preparation (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2005).

While traditional lesson plan frameworks have been critiqued by some researchers as failing to meet the needs of culturally diverse learners (Cochrane-Smith, 1995), other researchers have called on teacher educators to promote the development of detailed and well-thought-out lesson plans (Panasuk & Todd, 2002). Much of the theorizing on lesson planning, such as the work by Panasuk and Todd, has happened in mathematics education, where there is more consensus over content and learning goals than in social studies education. For instance, using experimental designs, researchers have found that elementary teachers who participated in a month-long workshop, a professional development program called Cognitively Guided Instruction (CGI), where they studied research-based analysis of children’s mathematical problem-solving, were more likely to encourage their students to use a variety of strategies and to listen to their students processes more than teachers in the treatment group (Carpenter et al., 1989). With CGI in mind, O’Mahony (2006) provided elementary teachers with written results of research on children’s thinking about food: its production, distribution, and consumption, which is a common topic in elementary social studies. Teachers in that study did not write plans that revealed that they had responded to what research revealed students would be likely to know or not know. Instead, the participants’ idiosyncratic unit plans were determined by available resources and familiarity with particular lessons.

Considered together, beyond text analysis, these two studies raise four issues for social studies researchers to explore: 1) the manner in which research-based findings are presented to teachers; 2) teachers’ perceptions of the relevance to them of research-based findings; 3) the quality and nature of research-based findings on children’s thinking in social studies; and 4) the importance of researcher and teacher-educator collaboration when attempting to undertake multi-faceted studies. The CGI projects prove that professional development workshops can foster classroom instruction in the U.S. that is based on student thinking. Also, follow-up investigations into CGI participants’ instructional practices (Franke et al., 2001) offer evidence that teachers engaged in ongoing professional conversations around mathematics sustain their focus on student thinking years after their participation in professional development workshops.

SOCIAL STUDIES PLANNING, PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES, AND THE INTERNET

Unfortunately, professional development activities and conversations around social
studies instruction are infrequent in many elementary schools these days. Although social studies is officially a core content area in most states, the current emphasis in elementary schools on literacy and numeracy means that time being spent on social studies instruction is continuing to decrease. Rock et. al. (2003) found that only 23% of the elementary teachers they surveyed taught social studies on a daily basis.

Fortunately for social studies advocates, the Internet is challenging, if not revolutionizing, the US culture of planning and teaching social studies and potentially the nature of research on it. The Department of Education in each state posts either standards documents or scope and sequence guidelines for each subject area, so teachers are no longer tied to particular textbooks or resources in the belief that the textbook in their classroom is the curriculum. Apart from government websites that provide lesson plans to help teach to particular standards, teacher organizations, public institutions, and the Council for Social Studies in each state offer access to lesson plans written by teachers. Similarly, well resourced school districts are providing their teachers with lesson plans, a portal to sites on the web, and detailed descriptions of possible teaching materials. The National Council for the Social Studies offers members access to its publications. Discipline-oriented interest groups such as the Geographic Alliance Network (http://www.ngsednet.org) and the Council for Economic Education (http://www.econedlink.org/) offer social studies teachers numerous lesson plans and web-based activities for students.

In many instances there are feedback sections and forums associated with these websites. Social studies teachers are able to find other colleagues, with different levels of experience, willing to talk about the practice of teaching social studies. These new forums for professional conversations around practice also change the landscape of research on social studies instruction. Although researchers are still bound by their universities’ ethics codes and procedures with regards to the protection of human subjects, online forums remove the institutional barriers of school and district-level policies that have hindered researchers’ access to teachers, to lesson plans as professional artifacts, and to teachers’ conversations about social studies curriculum and instruction.

Even if they may not agree on all of the standards that should be addressed in the K-12 curriculum, social studies advocates in Michigan should be delighted with the activities of the Michigan Citizenship Collaborative Curriculum group. This group, led by social studies consultants in six large intermediate school districts, has been using the Internet to share and review lessons written by local teachers to address the state social studies standards (http://www.micitizenshipcurriculum.org/). Oakland Schools’ Social Studies Consultant Amy Bloom (personal communication, June 17, 2011) explains that this collaborative venture came about because teachers were complaining about the lack of support available for teaching to Grade Level Content Expectations that were established by the Department of Education (http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-28753_33232---,00.html), but were to be implemented by local school districts. The lesson development process they are using has teams of “strong” teachers being given release time to research and design lesson plans. They work with university professors who provide feedback on content, offer suggestions of resources for using with students, and
ensure that “every course is an on-ramp to college courses.” The lesson plans are shared at professional development meetings where teachers are introduced to the content. They are asked to try out the lessons and provide feedback in the online discussion forums. Deliberately the planners do not suggest how to assess the lessons. Bloom explained that this would make it far too easy for people outside the classroom to create a competitive evaluative system across classrooms and schools. She pointed out that if common assessments are desired, the teachers themselves should design them.

This stance may seem somewhat wary of administrators’ and politicians’ oversight and potential interference with social studies instruction, until we consider another approach. In Arcadia, Louisiana, teachers use wiki technology to collaboratively create and edit websites for teacher use (Waters, 2007). Waters’ article shows that teachers archive lesson plans on the wikis. They also use curriculum-mapping software. “It provides a system of accountability by comparing classroom activity to district curriculum objectives and goals” (p. 44). While Waters appeared comfortable that the purpose of the software is to identify gaps and repetitions in the scope and sequence of a district’s curriculum, he quoted another software designer whose planning tool “tracks lesson plans” so that they “can make sure that curriculum maps are being enforced or followed” (p. 45). This state of affairs is of concern to educators who believe that social studies is the part of the curriculum that should be flexible enough to allow teachers to address issues as they arise in the teaching context. For instance, September 11 in the United States and March 11 in Japan were teachable moments for social studies educators around the world and across grade levels.

With the advent of the Internet and social media, teachers can find lesson plans and ideas from around the world. Planning need not be an isolated activity. However, they need to be aware that their online activities will be public, available to all with an Internet connection. Social studies content is interesting because it addresses values and beliefs, but teachers may be wary when it comes to posting their ideas about teaching controversial topics on professional websites. However, perhaps fear of being noticed and judged by others is cultural, only applicable in individually-oriented societies, or generational, only of concern to digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001) who were raised with a belief in a right to privacy. Digital natives in this individually-oriented society, on the other hand, have been raised in a world of Internet celebrities, multipurpose miniature electronic devices, and ubiquitous closed circuit surveillance.

**PURPOSEFUL RESEARCH ACTS**

In reflecting on decades of social studies research, one of the leaders in social studies research, James Shaver (2001), lamented its fractured nature. In order to move the field forward he proposed that social studies researchers should self-consciously and collaboratively focus their research efforts on the goal of designing and implementing artifacts and nonmaterial products to improve social studies education in schools. Recently Morris and Hiebert made a similar proposal for all educational researchers in *Educational
Researchers, the flagship journal of the American Educational Research Association (Morris & Hiebert, 2011).

The definitional ambiguity of social studies offers social studies researchers an opportunity to design artifacts and nonmaterial products that can facilitate teachers’ work as civic mentors of elementary school students, not as disciplinary sages with years of university study in every discipline that contributes to social studies, but as fellow citizens, becoming knowledgeable about particular topics in the curriculum, and informed about issues as they arise, planning experiences for students that will help them make sense of their social, economic, physical, and virtual environments. Researchers can support elementary teachers in honing their skills as learners and teachers who are focused on sharing what it means to participate in policy debates and decision-making for the common good in a rapidly changing world.

In 1994 the National Council for the Social Studies published “Expectations of Excellence: Standards for Social Studies,” a set of standards and definitions that provided state organizations with a broad framework from which to develop their own particular curriculum framework for social studies. Five deceptively simple principles for powerful social studies teaching and learning were offered: students are likely to learn when lessons are meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active (http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful). In a review of the teaching effectiveness literature, Rosenshine and Stevens (1986) determined that effective teachers attend to the behavior of all students, maintain students’ attention, give immediate feedback and evaluation, have clear expectations, and engage students as a group in learning. Applying these understandings about learning and teaching to our current contexts provides social studies researchers with a cornucopia of opportunities for studying elementary social studies instruction and directions in which to take their research.

With democratic citizenship in mind, researchers of elementary social studies education can undertake research projects and participate in conversations with teachers, students, student teachers, and school administrators that validate what John Dewey (1938) would have called “educative” learning goals. These could include:

1. Sharing with teachers what researchers already know from the research on teaching and learning.
2. Facilitating and recording the shared reflections and analysis, by teachers, of lessons, both as temporally fixed text and as iterative “works in progress.”
3. Studying the impact of teacher participants in terms of rationale building for teaching social studies, building a sense of efficacy, feeling motivated to teach social studies.
4. Creating a repository of data-based research insights about student thinking in social studies by facilitating, recording and sharing students’ representations of their understanding of particular lessons and topics in the curriculum.
5. Testing local theories by identifying the effects of local contextual conditions.
6. Engaging with student teachers as co-researchers to analyze plans on the internet, encouraging them to consider how these lessons might or might not meet the needs
of the learners they know, at the same time introducing them to virtual communities of educators.

7. Facilitating and recording conversations between student teachers and knowledgeable veterans around problematic social studies issues.

8. Documenting and analyzing democratic classroom and school practices that move beyond single lessons.

9. Facilitating, documenting, and analyzing professional conversations around planning, democratic classrooms, and schools.

ACKNOWLEDGING STUDENTS AND THEIR CONTEXTS IN ELEMENTARY SOCIAL STUDIES RESEARCH

Researchers can work with teachers and students to encourage and ensure the development and sharing of elementary social studies lessons and programs that acknowledge and shed light on students’ actual and virtual worlds outside school. In the United States this means stopping despairing over the loss of instructional time to literacy and numeracy and instead shifting the focus of researcher energies to facilitating discussions, in the spirit of Lesson Study, around lesson planning with student learning of substantive content at the core. There is a need for research that documents, analyzes, and theorizes the development of democratic learning communities that respect children, moving beyond the study of lessons alone, to the study of the lesson contexts, i.e., the classroom and the school.

It may be that this is best done by moving from experimental or quasi-experimental research designs to more qualitative, ethnographic approaches. It may also mean researchers and teachers developing and sustaining long-term classroom-based relationships where shared reflections on instruction and for instruction take place. The following example illustrates the potential of this research stance for improving instruction in social studies.

Since the 1980’s, thousands of American elementary teachers have used the “K-W-L” strategy to help them access students’ prior knowledge when preparing to read expository text, i.e., the text most often used in social studies classes. This model was developed using a standard experimental design. K stands for “know.” The teacher asks students what they know about a topic. W stands for “want.” The teacher asks students what they want to know about a topic. L stands for “learned.” Students share what they learned about a topic. At each point the teacher writes down what the students tell her, and this work product is put on display in the classroom. The model has continued to be refined by its developers, but K-W-L activities as they were initially shared are still commonly seen in elementary classrooms (Ogle, 2009).

However, Brophy and Alleman (2008) suggested that asking young children what they think they know about a topic in social studies is problematic because their knowledge is generally limited to what they have experienced. Based on dozens of interviews of young
Theorizing responsibility and reflecting on social studies instruction has been shared and published in numerous venues over the past ten years (Brophy, Alleman, & Knighton, 2008, 2010).

Thinking of classrooms and schools as sites for doing democracy, not just preparing for democracy (Dewey, 1916), means offering students choices (Kohn, 1993). Kohn pointed out that children in American schools are given very few choices; therefore it is not surprising that they become apathetic and bored with school. He reasoned that children need to be given many responsibilities in schools if they are to learn to take responsibility when they leave them. Shelley Berman of Educators for Social Responsibility (http://www.esrnational.org) made a key point: students learn math and writing by doing it but are expected to learn democracy by reading books. Instead, they need decision-making and negotiating skills. They need help to foster their skills of responsibility and caring.

CONCLUSION

Teaching for democracy means hearing students’ voices when planning and assessing classroom instruction. This may not be how the majority of classrooms are run when expectations are externally imposed. However, if standards and goals are broadly defined, then teacher educators can support teachers and administrators in creating democratic spaces. These would be schools and classrooms that empower students to make choices, to recognize and analyze the consequences of particular actions, and to discuss decisions that are being made for the group. Researchers can provide teachers and each other with visions of the possible by reporting on successful events in citizenship education (Field & Castro, 2010). Researchers can help teachers share practices and strategies that illustrate what planning for rich social studies classroom and school learning environments might look like beyond the single lesson (O’Mahony, 2005; O’Mahony & Siegel, 2008).
most importantly, researchers can use the internet to share their work with the thousands of elementary school teachers who are not members of official social studies organizations. Current US-based online journals with open access to social studies research include Social Studies Research and Practice (http://www.socstrp.org), The International Journal of Social Studies (http://www.iajiss.org), and The Journal of Social Studies Research (http://www.thejssr.com/).

In Japan there is a long and respected tradition of defining, studying, refining, and sharing classroom pedagogies through a collaborative practice called Lesson Study. If social studies education has democratic practices at its core and happens through productive, mutually beneficial relationships, it is fitting that social studies educators should embrace the principles inherent in Lesson Study. In the United States simplistic dualisms and summary judgments abound, especially in the popular press, where educators are often on trial and where new ideas are quickly judged good and therefore celebrated, or bad and therefore dismissed. Social studies advocates can hope that Lesson Study is successfully adopted, is deemed successful, and is celebrated. We can work towards facilitating a collegial culture of teaching where reflecting on and for classroom instruction together in elementary social studies is considered vitally important work, in turn creating classrooms, schools and communities where children and adults are aware, informed, and active citizens.

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