

## Understanding, analysing and reflecting on court cases (the Netherlands)

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### **Introduction**

The main objective of the LS was to gain 'grip' or control over the introduction of the lesson. What stood out from a discussion on our mutual experiences is the lack of action from students after an instruction. Students responded by saying things like 'I don't get it' or 'What am I supposed to do?', or complaints like 'How is this useful?' We wondered how an introduction may be designed that motivates students to get to work immediately? How can a stimulating instruction motivate students to actively engage in their assignments at the start of a class?

We oriented ourselves on theories on differentiating in the classroom, various learning styles and strategies.

### **Context**

The study involved a mix of students from account management, management assistant and administration. Teachers involved were six colleagues from the same section of economics and commerce, and a facilitator who is a teacher at the same educational institution. They have consulted an educational expert as a knowledgeable other.

The course was planned in seven meetings. There was online collaboration and a few short meetings in between to discuss practical, logistical matters. The KO was present during the research lesson as well, and gave feedback.

### **Focus and process**

We wanted to gain insight in the part of a lesson that, in the eyes of the teacher, influences the start of the learning process. For this lesson we made a description of the expected learning behaviour of students. We grouped them into three categories: underachiever, average achiever, above average achiever. During observations we focused on these groups and we interviewed several students afterwards.

From the lesson plan:

The research lesson we conducted falls under 'Career and Citizenship' in VET. The corresponding core task is: Developing in career and citizenship, political and legal dimension.

During this lesson, students will look at a high-profile judicial ruling by a judge in the Netherlands. Students delve (briefly) into the case, look at the ruling and give reasoned opinions on what they think of the ruling. Then they get a short instruction by the teacher on the basis of 2 cases. In smaller groups, these cases are studied with guided questions, an opinion is formed about the case and an expected verdict is noted.

The two cases involve judicial rulings that have been controversial in the Netherlands. The first case involved the murder of a politician. The second case involved a group of (Dutch) tourists who molested and killed a Dutch man during their holidays in Mallorca.

## **Response**

A short summary of some of our findings: Students responded well to the cases. In group work they often 'dived into their laptops' without any prior deliberation. Students who did not get answers to their questions sometimes got frustrated. They want to know if they are 'doing it right'. Feedback with each achievement is important. In general they tend to remain focused as long as their peers remain focused, and group dynamics had a great influence on their work.

We experienced both the contemplation of expected behaviour before the class, its observation during and the interviews thereafter as very valuable. We gained new insights and discovered the different ways in which students experience the same lesson (attention to personalisation / differentiation).

Our main findings of conducting a lesson study were the value of conversations on didactical topics with colleagues. Observing in a colleague's class was very informative as well. Observing and interviewing students led to new insights. Together you see and know more. We also found all steps in the LS process to be of value.

## **LS journey**

Quotes from personal reflections by the teachers.

One:

At first, I was a bit hesitant because I didn't immediately see the added value of LS. Fortunately, I had to change my mind. Even though it was sometimes difficult to make appointments with the group, when we got together it was fun and instructive to think about the purpose and content of the lesson to be given. It was instructive to see other colleagues busy when the lesson was taught and also how the group responded to it. It amazed me that the groups to whom the lesson was given even found an intro about 15 minutes long.... It was also interesting to see how the groups engaged in the processing task and how the feedback was throughout the group. What I took away from the lessons given is that, what we as teachers often take for granted, as a teacher you should always check if the student has understood the instruction, write difficult terms on the board and/or come back to them. Another thing I took away from it is that visiting colleagues' classes with me and vice versa should be given (more) form and content again. Now lessons are often taught alone and there is almost never feedback on the lessons taught. While we as teachers may think we are doing extremely well, a colleague who is watching my lessons may see very different things in me and certainly in the group being taught. I certainly want to take that point into the future.

Two:

In the beginning I had doubts about participating, because it was unclear exactly what was expected of me and what I would get out of it. Still glad I said yes, because I found it instructive to prepare a lesson together with my colleagues. Preparing a lesson is normally something you do independently, but to watch this with several people is instructive. Your colleagues pay attention to different things that you do. You are put on edge again. On top of that, we also evaluated together on the basis of interviews we had done with students. The main thing I take away from this is that as a teacher I perhaps think too often: 'the student can do this' or 'the student will understand this'. But there are students where this is not true. These students lack certain basic knowledge or have a so-called backpack [social or psychological problems]. For me, a wise lesson is to keep an eye on this in my own classes, so that I can guide each student in the desired way.

Furthermore, being present with each other in a class is very nice and interesting. Both for the teacher teaching the lesson and the teacher visiting. You learn from each other and on the basis of such a lesson, we as teachers can give each other feedback, if necessary, which only makes us better and thus ultimately better educating our students.

Three:

At first the content and purpose of LS was a bit vague for me, however, after the introduction that followed after committing my participation, I got more clarity on the how and why. For all participants, and the KO it was the first time LS was put into practice. This made it a bit of an endeavor to figure out how to put it into practice. In the second and third meetings we worked on the research question, the division of tasks, etc. Gradually I found that our research question could have been formulated more sharply. This shows the importance of formulating a clear and measurable research question.

After the execution of lesson 1, the subsequent adjustments and the execution of lesson 2 made it even clearer to me how important it is to examine how a lesson, made with all good intentions, comes across to students. Is the lesson appealing? Do I connect to previously acquired knowledge? Do I have a good picture of the student beforehand? By observing and later interviewing the student, useful information emerged that can be used in a subsequent lesson. In this second lesson, the adjustments made provided a better result.

For myself, the LS method has been an eye-opener in that it focuses on the student rather than the teacher. I think that a second round of LS could be more efficient and take less time because of the previous experience with a cycle of LS. It is also conceivable to apply LS in a smaller context. I found it instructive to observe and interview students. The interviews with students were open in nature and I got useful information about the lesson, what appealed and what especially did not. I also experienced the collaboration with the other LS participants as pleasant and safe. As far as I am concerned, LS can be used more widely but it is especially important to explain clearly at the front what LS entails. I found this very vague in this cycle. Otherwise, highly recommended.

Four:

I was asked to participate in a LessonStudy program, which was totally unknown to me. I was told that this would be very valuable for my own development as a trainee teacher and would be a nice contribution to my [qualification] portfolio. Beforehand, the set-up was not entirely clear and the goal was still somewhat vague. I did not know exactly what my role would be and how I could be of value in the LS program.

At the first meeting, it became clear to me that this would be about how to teach a lesson, with a subject teaching approach. For me this was a new way of working, I am used to looking at the teacher's actions and matching subject content and didactics.

During the meetings the goal became increasingly clear and I noticed that we as a working group wanted to go for it and kept each other on our toes. Under the leadership of the facilitator we were able to make great strides. By making a schedule in advance it was clear to everyone where we stood in the process and we kept each other focused on the tasks that were still open. The facilitator's guidance in this was also very valuable.

For me, the meetings were a logical consecutive series in which we first had to get a clear idea of what we wanted to do and in what way. Through a main question we figured out how to turn this into a feasible situation, in this case a lesson.

I look back on a very valuable period. I found the collaboration with the group and guidance very pleasant and everyone had valuable input. The different levels of teaching experience allowed us to look at things from different perspectives.

For me, looking at how to teach a lesson was interesting and innovative for me. As indicated, I am only used to looking at the teacher's actions. After this course, I take away that the way you teach a lesson (and student-centered) is just as important as the teacher in front of the class. My goal for my future career is to collect feedback on lessons from students more often.

Five:

I was asked to participate in a cycle of Lesson Study. For me as a starting teacher, this is an excellent opportunity to learn with and from colleagues. In addition, participating in this cycle is an enrichment for my qualification portfolio.

Examining student behaviour around a predetermined research question is central. By focusing on the student, the cycle takes on a practical character through preparing, teaching and evaluating the lesson. What I like about this is that by conducting the interviews, among other things, we were able to get useful results fairly quickly. A good example of this is the student who indicated in the interview that he would quickly drop out of an instruction if too many difficult words were used for him. Too often in my instruction I assume that one clear explanation can or should be understood by every student. However, the interview with the student in question showed that this is definitely not the case.

I also noticed the difference in starting points (having prior knowledge) in these lessons. What was noticeable is that the students who made themselves heard in class generally also had more knowledge about the topic. Perhaps this was to be expected, but this gave me the insight that when a student shies away it may not always be due to a lack of interest. A bit of understanding explanation can already help boost motivation.

In the beginning of the cycle I found it difficult to get a clear picture of the goal. Gradually in the process this changed. I think that the well-defined time schedule (cycle of about 8 weeks in total) and the clear instruction and guidance of our facilitator had a positive influence on this. I do think that the research question could have been formulated a bit better/clearer (more SMART).

I experienced the whole process as instructive and definitely see the added value of working together with colleagues in this process. The whole process has shown me that the perfect lesson does not exist and that there are always aspects that can be used better or differently. Lesson Study, in my view, is a great tool for achieving this. I can therefore imagine wanting to participate in such a cycle at a later date. On the one hand to deepen my professional basis and on the other hand as an expert by experience to improve the cycle as a whole.