

Collaborative Lesson Preparation (Primary)

What is collaborative lesson preparation (CLP)? What do teachers actually do? What is the role of an external agent?

In order to have a better understanding of some of the processes involved in CLP, three episodes of effective CLP have been outlined below. The annotations are there to help conceptualize the rationale behind CLP.

The first episode:

	An edited transcript:	Annotation
	(Andy and Siu Kwan, two English teachers, have just finished watching a video showing Siu Kwan teaching the Big Book "The King's Chef" in a P.2 classroom)	<i>Since CLP encourages teachers to discuss and plan lessons together, it can be a natural platform for peer observation.</i>
Andy	Siu Kwan, didn't we plan in our last CLP to have the first reading followed immediately by role play? We said we wanted to make use of the role play to draw out responses from the students. That was to be our teaching focus.	<i>Teaching focuses are clearly identified during CLP.</i>
Siu Kwan	I'm sorry. I changed the plan on the spot. I thought it would be a good idea to ask the students questions after the first reading. I wanted to check their understanding before I moved on to role play. But afterwards I didn't have enough time, so I finished the lesson by reading the story one more time.	<i>The gap between a planned and an implemented curriculum can only be bridged through peer observation. When teachers articulate their thinking, they are reflecting on their practice.</i>
Andy	I believe you had already checked the students' understanding while you were doing the first reading. You asked them a lot of questions and they answered correctly. So in the end when you asked the students questions like "What does the king like to eat? What does the queen like to eat?", I think you were not checking their understanding, you were asking them to recall the details of the story.	<i>Interactions like this may sound a bit critical, but they are catalysts for reflective thinking.</i>
Siu Kwan	I'm glad that you pointed that out. That explains the responses of the students. No one could remember the details of the story and the questions dragged on for quite a long time. So in the end, I didn't have enough time to move on to role play which was supposed to be our teaching focus.	<i>A supportive environment is conducive to in-depth discussion. Students' responses and work are taken seriously as feedback to inform future practice.</i>
Andy	But your questioning technique was effective in other places. You asked the students questions about the pictures before reading the story. You encouraged students to predict the story. You captured the attention of the students successfully. And you also asked them questions from time to time during the reading to check their understanding. You engaged them in the reading process....	<i>This kind of professional dialogue helps teachers make their tacit knowledge more explicit</i>

The second episode:

An edited transcript:	Annotation
<p>(This school practises streaming at P.4 level. A Curriculum Development Officer from the Education Department is having a professional sharing with 4 English teachers. This episode captures the interaction between the CDO and Natalie, one of the teachers. Most students in Natalie's class are high achievers.)</p>	<p><i>CLP enables teachers to design lessons that cater to the needs of their own students.</i></p>
<p>CDO Natalie, did you try the poem "Pancake Day" with your P.4A?</p>	
<p>Natalie Yes, I did. My students liked the poem a lot. I also tried the multi-sensory approach you shared with me in our last meeting. I did some reading on multi-sensory approach before I tried it in class.</p>	<p><i>Teachers' repertoire can be enhanced and skills improved through professional sharing during CLP.</i></p>
<p>CDO How exactly did you implement that? What was the effect of this approach on learning?</p>	
<p>Natalie When I taught the poem, I asked the students to help me to think of actions that went with the lines. For example, when the students read the line "toss the pancake", they did an action like this (Natalie does the action of tossing with her hand). The students' response was enthusiastic. I could see that miming helped my students to remember the lines.</p>	
<p>CDO That sounds exciting. But was it the multi-sensory approach that was working or was it the poem that was working?</p>	<p><i>The role of an external agent is to facilitate teachers' reflective thinking.</i></p>
<p>Natalie I'm sure it was the multi-sensory approach that was working. Because I used it when I taught the third-person singular. In the past, my students kept forgetting to add "s" to the third-person singular. No matter how many times I repeated it, some students still couldn't get it right. I repeated it again and again, I was just like an old broken record. This time I tried the multi-sensory approach. I told the students to follow me and make a sign like this (Natalie made a cross with her index fingers) when we came across items on the worksheet to which they had to add an "s". Afterwards I asked the students to finish the worksheet at home. When I did the marking, I was surprised to find that most students, including the weak ones, got the third-person singular correct. That's really encouraging.</p>	<p><i>CLP provides a safe platform for developing and trying out new teaching/learning strategies.</i></p>

The third episode:

An edited transcript:	Annotation
<p>(Natalie and Johnny are P.5 English teachers. They are having a professional sharing with a Curriculum Development Officer in the common room)</p> <p>Natalie I don't know why, but my students didn't do well in the exam, especially in the section on reading. Even the bright ones scored very low marks. I didn't expect that.</p>	<p><i>CLP is a time when teachers can share with others problems they come across in classroom teaching.</i></p>
<p>CDO Did you ask the students why they didn't do well in this section?</p>	
<p>Natalie Yes, I did. The students said there were many words they didn't know in the passage.</p>	
<p>CDO What do you think?</p>	
<p>Natalie I agree that there are many new words, but there are pictures as well, so I expected that the students could guess the meaning easily.</p>	
<p>CDO Did they do that during the exam?</p>	
<p>Natalie Most obviously they didn't. They thought they had to understand every word before they could do the reading.</p>	
<p>CDO Did the students apply their reading skills in class?</p>	
<p>Natalie I don't know. When I taught the "Fun reading" part in the textbook, I usually asked the students to read aloud in class. I corrected their pronunciation. Then I explained the meaning to the students. If they didn't have any questions, I asked them to do pair reading. I walked around and gave individual attention to the students.</p>	
<p>CDO That's a sensible arrangement. But what was the teaching focus when you did that? Were you teaching reading or were you teaching vocabulary?</p>	
<p>Natalie I'm not sure. I guess I focused more on vocabulary than on reading skills. But it's difficult to do so with the textbook. The visual clues in most of the reading passages are simply not strong enough to encourage prediction. Besides, most of my students have the habit of checking the meanings of the words before coming to my lessons.</p>	

An edited transcript:		Annotation
CDO	How about giving the students extra passages to read, like the one they got in the exam?	
Johnny	But we don't have time.	
Natalie	How about skipping the "Fun Reading" part in Unit 5? Last year most students found that passage boring.	<i>CLP gives teachers time and space to revise the curriculum so as to cater to the needs of the students.</i>
Johnny	I have no objection to that since my class has the same problem as Natalie's. But what about dictation?	
Natalie	How about skipping it once since we have already had 5 times in the second term? I think we should make reading our first priority. After all, our students' spelling is not that bad.	<i>CLP gives teachers space to make professional judgments.</i>

Conclusion:

Since teachers bring to CLP different dispositions, teaching beliefs, attitudes, past and present teaching and learning experiences, the group dynamics vary. The role of an external agent varies accordingly. Sometimes an external agent plays the role of a facilitator, an observer, a critical friend, a problem solver or even a subject expert. However, with or without an external agent, teachers can still have CLP. But the real spirit of CLP can NEVER be achieved unless there is trust and rapport among teachers.