

Collaborating with Colleagues in a Video Study Group

To appear in

ENC Focus

Miriam Gamoran Sherin
School of Education and Social Policy
Northwestern University
2120 Campus Drive
Evanston, IL 60208
msherin@northwestern.edu

Collaborating with Colleagues in a Video Study Group

Middle school math teachers draw on their own expertise as they analyze videos of their classroom practice.

Miriam Gamoran Sherin, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois

Once a month, David, Alexa, Nathan, and Michael meet after school in a *video study group*. Together, they watch and discuss excerpts of videos from their seventh and eighth grade mathematics classes. Through this experience, they are learning more about the teaching and learning of mathematics, and developing their own learning community as a result.

In the past, these teachers met together in monthly department meetings. This year they decided they wanted something more. Department meetings focused mainly on administrative issues such as communicating with parents and budget problems, and it was hard to find time to discuss substantive issues related to teaching and learning. What was happening in each others' classrooms? What and how were students learning? What questions had come up for the teachers during instruction?

While each teacher had been involved in various professional development activities, these were generally pursued individually and not as a group. These teachers realized they wanted the opportunity to work with their own colleagues on issues related to teaching and learning. Thus, when I asked them to participate in a research project by starting a video study group at their school, they enthusiastically agreed.

A New Form of Collaboration

As part of the video study group, each month one teacher volunteers to bring a video from his or her classroom to the group. Part of my role is to help the teacher videotape the lesson. The teacher and I then review the video and select a five- to ten-minute excerpt for the group to watch in the next meeting.

As the video study group meeting begins, the teacher provides background information on the lesson and the group watches the selected excerpt. The rest of the 45-minute meeting is spent discussing the video, sometimes watching it more than once to take a closer look.

At one recent meeting, the group watched a video from David's class in which students described several methods for estimating the number of dots in a densely filled rectangle. Several students suggested sampling a square within the rectangle, though the students disagreed about the size of the square to be sampled. In the video study group, the teachers discussed what they had seen.

Alexa: Huh, that's an interesting idea.

Michael: ...Would it matter, how large a square you took?

- Nathan: Are the dots uniformly placed? So taking a small sample, taking a small square wouldn't make you any less accurate than the large square?
- David: But isn't it more likely to be uniform in a big square? So if you take a really small square they're not?
- Nathan: I think that's just the question.
- Michael: Yeah, for the students, too. [In the video] Robert is saying you need a larger square, because then that will take into account places that have lots of dots and places that don't have lots of dots...
- David: I'm looking at [the rectangle], and it's hard to tell [if the dots are uniformly placed].
- Alexa: And then there's the question ... [of where] you take the samples. Did you hear [what] Jenna says? "It would be more accurate if you took 10 small squares but in different places, and then took the average."

Even in this brief excerpt, it is clear that the teachers are trying to understand the different ideas about sampling that had come up in David's class. They note Robert's and Jenna's suggestions and highlight the main point of each. The teachers also attempt to sort out their own understandings of sampling--when Michael asked "Would it matter, how large a square you took?" Through this interaction, the teachers became aware of a range of student ideas about sampling as well as the extent to which students could productively compare these different methods.

Throughout the school year, analyzing video from their classrooms has prompted the teachers to discuss a range of topics:

- Pedagogy. What were the teachers' goals for the lesson? How did the teacher participate in the lesson?
- Student thinking. What is the meaning of that student's idea? How did the student come up with that method?
- Mathematics. What are the main issues involved in data sampling? What is the difference between linear and exponential growth?
- Discourse. Are students responding to each other? Do students have to explain their thinking?

And all of these topics have been discussed in the context of their own classrooms, brought to life for each other via video.

Noted one participant, "It's amazing what I'm learning in the video study groups. It's not just that I'm seeing what's happening in [my colleagues'] classrooms. I'm even learning more about what's happening in my own classroom. Working together, we can just see a whole lot more."

Key Features of a Video Study Group

What is it about video study groups that teachers find so valuable? And why do such groups have the ability to foster teacher learning and teacher community?

Clearly, providing teachers with time and space to collaborate is a significant feature of video study groups. And the video itself is also a critical feature, providing a lasting record that can be viewed repeatedly. In addition, in talking with teachers about their experiences in video study groups, three features seem to be of particular importance.

Examples not Exemplars

First, in other professional development programs, video is often used to show teachers what they should and should not do. Selected video excerpts are intended as exemplars to be emulated later by the viewers.

Video study groups take a different approach. The goal is not to illustrate one's best practice, but rather to draw from what is typical in one's classroom and to select an episode that is interesting and that will prompt the viewer to want to take a closer look.

Some examples that teachers have shared include a novel method that a student devised and demonstrated in class, a whole-class discussion in which students raised competing ideas, and a lesson that took an unexpected turn as it was implemented.

One group member commented, "It's been important to have excerpts where something wasn't so perfectly clear 'cause then we could talk about [it] and try to figure out what was happening."

"It wouldn't have worked to just show each other what was best," said another teacher. "The value was in having something to talk about."

A third teacher noted, "It was really validating to have something that didn't seem to be a perfect interaction and have teachers excited about what my students were saying."

Investigation not Evaluation

Second, often when teachers observe other's classrooms, they tend to evaluate the teaching that takes place, making suggestions for what the teacher might have done better. Because of the collaborative nature of the video study group, the teachers chose to steer away from such evaluative comments and to focus instead on investigating the teaching and learning shown on the video.

This decision had a powerful impact on the nature of the video study group. The teachers' purpose became making sense of what was happening in the video excerpts. They worked to understand, at a deep level, the mathematical issues that are discussed in their classes, how students talk about ideas, and the teacher's role in supporting student learning.

One group member remarked, “Not evaluating was tricky at first. Folks felt that what was viewed was their teaching. But we came to understand that really what we were looking at was student learning. This helped because it took my teaching out of the spotlight...and I learned to really take a look at what students were doing.”

“If we were just trying to evaluate teaching, we wouldn’t have gotten very far together,” said another teacher. “It would have been hard. Instead, what was so valuable was taking a close look at what we saw and what students were thinking about. The more we analyzed students, the more we came up with new ways to listen to students, both in the study group and back in our classrooms.”

Expertise from the Inside not the Outside

Third, the teachers’ own knowledge and experiences are the main resource for the video study group. Their work together is not guided by a textbook for teachers or by an online course. And even though I attend the meetings and help to videotape the teachers’ classrooms, I am not seen as an expert who has come to tell them what is happening in the videos.

Instead, the teachers rely on their own expertise to make progress in the video study group, with my role limited to supporting their efforts and observing what occurs. This sense of “expertise from the inside” has helped to establish the video study group as a professional learning community for those involved.

For instance, on some occasions, the teacher whose video is shown has information about a student or lesson that helps clarify the video excerpt. But just as often it is one of the other members of the group with a particular perspective that sheds valuable light on what has taken place in the video.

Similarly, the more experienced teachers in the group are not seen as experts with something to “teach” the less experienced teachers. All of the teachers are recognized as having expertise, and all are eager to learn from each other.

“We definitely learned from each other,” commented one teacher. “[The other teachers] would have a perspective on kids’ conversations that I didn’t have. I needed to hear those ideas. We helped each other come to understand kids’ ideas differently.”

Another group member said, “Having a video study group with teachers from my school brought us to a level of camaraderie that we didn’t have before. And that’s got to be because our purpose was that we’re out here to help each other, to listen to each other, and [to] learn.”

In fact, at the end of the school year, the teachers decided to continue the video study group the following year, even though I would be moving out of the area. And there are other cases in which teachers have organized video study groups at their schools without any assistance from outside researchers.

Developing a Professional Learning Community

Participating in a video study group can provide teachers with a valuable forum for interacting with their colleagues around important issues related to teaching and learning. By using video examples from each others' classrooms, teachers can investigate teaching in a detailed manner that is not usually possible in the midst of instruction.

Finally, working together to make sense of their own practice provides a common goal for teachers. This, in turn, helps to develop and nourish a strong sense of teacher community.

Miriam Gamoran Sherin teaches at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Her interests include mathematics teaching and learning, teacher cognition, and the use of video to support teacher learning. Email: msherin@northwestern.edu

Note: The author wishes to thank David A. Louis who teaches at The Nueva School in Hillsborough, California and participates in the video study group. His colleagues in the group preferred to be identified with pseudonyms. Students are also identified in that manner.

Selected Readings

Sherin, M. G. & van Es, E. A. (2003). A New Lens on Teaching: Learning to Notice. *Mathematics Teaching in the Middle School*, 9(2), 92-95.

Sherin, M. G. (2003). Using Video Clubs to Support Conversations among Teachers and Researchers. *Action in Teacher Education*, 4, 33-45.

Sherin, M. G. (2000). Taking a fresh look at teaching through video clubs. *Educational Leadership*, 57(8), 36-38.

Tochon, F.V. (1999). *Video Study Groups for Education, Professional Development and Change*. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.