Learning from Instructional Rounds

When teachers conduct instructional rounds, they focus on why a problem of practice persists schoolwide—and on what they can do about it.

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How do we improve our collective teaching practice? How do we ensure that every classroom is a place of rich and valuable learning for all students? And who's responsible for doing so?

Over the last several years, my colleagues and I, in collaboration with educators across the United States, Canada, and Australia, have tried to answer these questions.[1] The model we've developed to improve instructional practice is based on medical rounds, the primary way that doctors learn and improve their practice. We call the approach *instructional rounds*.

The practice, which began with administrators, has become increasingly popular in schools. Teachers are usually the most enthusiastic rounds participants, leading the next evolution of the practice.

What Are Instructional Rounds?

Instructional rounds are a disciplined way for educators to work together to improve instruction (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). The practice combines three common elements of improvement: classroom observation, an improvement strategy, and a network of educators. Many educators currently use one or more of these elements, often with some success. In our own work, my

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colleagues and I have found that it's the *combination* of elements that's most powerful. We have also found that it's hard to dislodge familiar habits and behaviors that serve different purposes, the most ingrained of which are supervision and evaluation.

Instructional rounds contrast with supervision and evaluation on a number of dimensions, the first of which is learning (see fig. 1, p. 39). Rounds are an inquiry process. People doing rounds should expect to learn something themselves. In supervision and evaluation, only the person *being* observed is expected to learn. I think of this as the difference between looking through a window (supervision and evaluation) and holding up a mirror (rounds).

Participants in rounds, particularly teachers, emphasize the learning they do as observers. "My teachers schooled me pretty quickly on this—you don't learn anything by being observed, only by observing," said John Roberts, assistant director at Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School in Lowell, Massachusetts, after introducing rounds to his faculty.

What are students doing and saying? What's the teacher doing and saying? What's the task?

Rounds are not about "fixing" individual teachers. Rounds are about understanding what's happening in classrooms, how we as a system produce those effects, and how we can move closer to producing the learning we want to see.

This focus on "we" means that peers learn to hold one another accountable, individually and collectively. For rounds to accelerate improvement, educators need a protocol for taking next steps that they've committed to on their own. They don't rely on someone with formal authority to enforce agreements or on others to comply with mandates. In the California Rural Network, for example, superintendents do follow-up visits with one another after rounds visits. They say this follow-up visit from a peer helps them take action amid multiple competing priorities.

Rounds are fundamentally descriptive and analytic, not evaluative. At no point in rounds do we declare what we see to be "good" or "bad" or something we "like" or "don't like." Observers don't tell the observed what to do next to improve. However, observers *do* think about "the next level of work" or what the school or district could do to make progress in a problem area.

Finally, because rounds are about the instructional core, when my colleagues

and I are in classrooms we focus on the interactions among teachers, students, and content. Effective supervision and evaluation, of course, pay attention to these things as well. However, educators consistently say that one of their early changes in practice as a result of participating in rounds is a shift of attention from the teacher to the students and the tasks they're engaged in.

How Do You Do Instructional Rounds?

Although educators adapt rounds to their purpose and context, the essential practice looks the same and relies heavily on protocol: You gather a group of colleagues who will meet together over time (that is, you form a *network*); you define a problem of practice connected to your improvement strategy; you visit classrooms in small groups; you debrief after the observation; you identify next levels of work and build the group's relevant knowledge and skills; and you repeat this process often.

Assemble a Network

Some networks are composed of peers (all superintendents, principals, or teachers). Others have cross-functional groups (teachers and administrators together or multiple roles across a district). Some educators build on existing networks and incorporate rounds into their practice; others form new networks for rounds. Some are intentional about who is in the network (for example, staff members in shared content areas or in cross-content areas that focus on a shared issue); others are pragmatic (for example, those who have a common planning period do rounds together).

The same group meets over time, giving members the opportunity to build a trusting, respectful community that pushes itself hard and develops a common language and understanding of learning and teaching. Networks typically range from 8 to 30 members.

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Instructional rounds are a disciplined way for educators to work together to improve instruction.

Define the Problem of Practice

A problem of practice is something the school cares about, feels stuck on, and wants to understand more deeply. A problem of practice focuses on instruction, is observable and actionable, connects to a broader strategy of improvement, and is high leverage (City et al., 2009). See "Common Problems of Practice" (p. 40) for examples.

Schools vary in their process for determining a problem of practice. The process works best when it's connected to ongoing improvement work and is based on data. A school might convene its instructional leadership team and ask the following questions: Where do we feel stuck? Where are we struggling? How do we know we're struggling? Which situation do we need help collecting data on and thinking about?

Schools sometimes invite the whole faculty to identify a problem of practice; sometimes they work with their leadership team to identify a problem. And sometimes, frankly, they pluck the problems of practice out of thin air, with just the principal deciding what the "problem" is. I don't recommend that option, as it usually results in little improvement and in data that teachers aren't all that interested in.

Ballarat Clarendon College, a K–12 school in Victoria, Australia, started with this problem of practice:

> We've noticed that our students are more often engaged in tasks that involve remembering and understanding than in tasks that involve analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Some students aren't getting enough opportunities to practice higher-order thinking skills and to take an active role in the learning process.

At Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School, teachers thought that students struggled with intellectual curiosity. Students sat in class "absorbing" and didn't ask questions. After examining this problem of practice in rounds, teachers decided that the level of the task assigned might have something to do with students' lack of intellectual curiosity, so they shifted the problem of

FIGURE 1. Instructional Rounds Versus Supervision and Evaluation

	Instructional Rounds	Supervision and Evaluation
Learning stance	Inquiry: Genuinely want to learn something ourselves Main learners: The observers	Informative: Genuinely want someone else to learn something Main learner: The observed
Unit of improvement	Meant to improve the collective (school, system)	Meant to improve the individual
Account-ability	Lateral (peer-to-peer)	Positional (top-down)
Output	Next level of work, collective commitments	Evaluative feedback, prescriptions for next steps
Primary focus in the classroom	The instructional core, especially the students and the tasks they're engaged in	The teacher

practice to be about the level of the task and the level of teacher questioning.

Observe in Classrooms

The network divides into small groups of approximately four people. Each group typically visits four classrooms, staying 20–25 minutes in each. Observers don't have rubrics to guide them because they're gathering descriptive data rather than assessing against a rubric. However, they usually do have focus questions related to the problem of practice, such as, What are students doing and saying? What's the teacher doing and saying? What's the task? They also question students about what they're working on, what they do when they don't understand something, and how they know whether their work is good or great.

The problem of practice acts as a filter. In classrooms, observers don't pay attention to all the things they think are important. For example, if the problem of practice is about higher-order thinking skills, observers try to ignore how well students are behaving, what is or isn't on the walls, or whether the teacher wrote the objective on the board. Observers also don't do an implementation check on a given strategy. They're detectives, not inspectors. They try to unlock the mystery of why the school is stuck, why this problem of practice persists, and what might help the school get unstuck.

Between classroom visits, observers don't chat about what they saw or what they thought about what they saw. They save that for the formal debrief.

Debrief

Lowell Middlesex Academy assistant director John Roberts finds the rounds protocol crucial. "The reason we follow this protocol," he notes, "is that it separates us from the practice and keeps us from being the crazy, judgmental human beings we are." The debriefing protocol moves in steps from description to analysis to prediction and leads participants into identifying the next level of work.

Describe. In the description phase, the various observation groups come together to share the evidence they collected related to the problem of practice. Evidence is most helpful when it's specific and descriptive as opposed to judgmental or general. Gathering and stating specific, descriptive evidence are learned skills that educators can help one another with. When you hear something judgmental—such as, "The teacher talked too much" or "The questions were mostly low level"—ask "What's the evidence?" When you hear something general—such as "The teacher asked lots of questions"—ask for specificity, for instance, "What were some specific questions the teacher asked?"

Analyze. Having built the evidentiary foundation for a strong discussion, observation groups move into the analysis phase, looking for patterns across the evidence and noting exceptions to the patterns. Patterns might include the following:

- Teachers ask questions that require one- or two-word answers, and students respond with one or two words.
- Students sit in groups, yet work individually.
- The pattern of interaction is teacher–student–teacher, with teachers initiating the conversation.

We pause at this point in the debriefing session so each group can share the patterns it has seen. Often, a distinct pattern will emerge across the school—that tasks are low level, for example—but sometimes groups see different patterns in a certain grade level, content area, or classroom.

Predict. Next, the protocol asks, "If you were a student in these classes today and you did everything the teacher asked you to do, what would you know and be able to do?" This question doesn't ask what you think teachers *hope* students will learn or what the objectives written on the board are, but what students would actually learn if they completed the tasks given to them. For example, observers might predict that students would be able to follow directions, recall information, or

complete mathematics problems if they had the formula for the problems in front of them.

Identify the Next Level of Work

Taking into account all the evidence, what do we now understand about this stuck place? How can the school focus its energy and resources to make progress on the problem of practice? What new knowledge and skills might teachers need, and how might the school support that learning?

For example, a rounds visit might reveal that in a school whose students struggle with higher-order thinking, teachers typically give students fairly low-level tasks. The next level of work might be for the teachers to see these data together—for example, teachers might collect all the tasks given on a certain day and then assess them using a framework like Bloom's taxonomy.

On the basis of their assessment, the teachers might identify the support they need, which might involve having more time to design tasks together or receiving training in Bloom's taxonomy. At the same time, school leadership might not only reorganize planning time to make it possible for teachers to design tasks together, but also look at how challenging the tasks are that *adults* are being asked to complete during professional development and other meetings. The school might stop having informational meetings where teachers are just called on to listen and, instead, create sessions where teachers are challenged as learners.

Different networks experiment with different ways of formulating the next level of work. Some brainstorm action steps for this week, next month, and by the end of the year. Others generate reflective questions to prompt further thinking, such as, In a differentiated classroom, what would teachers and students be doing? or How do teachers know that their students understand? At Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School, teachers create commitment cards and post the cards in their classrooms. For example, one might read, "Ask a question at the evaluation level at the beginning of class."

Inevitably, rounds bring to the surface areas of need that can inform professional development. In Boston Public Schools, for example, high school principals worked together to generate a common definition of rigor but realized they didn't all agree on what it looked like in the classroom. Through rounds, they identified a districtwide pattern of tasks focused on remembering, understanding, and, from time to time, applying. The next level of work was engaging teachers in rounds and developing a deeper understanding of rigor.

As a result, the central office designed a course on rigor and the practice of rounds. Teachers learned that students with low skills do not need low-level tasks—rather, they need supports to successfully engage with high-level tasks. They also learned to compare the stated task with the enacted task, which may be more low-level than expected; students may simply be doing more of something or following the teacher's example rather than really using their minds. Teachers took the course, learned how to do rounds, and will facilitate rounds focused on rigor as a problem of practice in their schools.

For Judith Blanco, district instructional coach for Boston's high schools, rounds are a "cyclical process that ties your whole school improvement plan, your professional development, and

Common Problems of Practice

- Are students engaged in high-level or low-level tasks? Do teachers ask high-level or low-level questions?
- Are students able to articulate their thinking in writing?
- Are students able to transfer learning from one content area or grade level to another?
- Is students' understanding in mathematics conceptual or only procedural?
- Are students active or passive participants in class?
- Are some students—such as students with special needs, English language learners, boys, or girls— performing as well as they might? If not, what does this looks like in the classroom?
- Do teachers do most of the talking and thinking in the classroom?
- Do teachers enact a high-level curriculum in a low-level way?
- How do teachers know what students know?
- How do students know the quality of their work?
- What role do students play in assessment?
- How do students talk with one another about classwork?

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your rounds together, all informing each other." Because the process is cyclical, she says, "rounds shouldn't be one-time events." Melissa Chen, science teacher at Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School, agrees: "We don't see rounds as an extra thing—they're part of what we do." At Lowell Middlesex Academy, teachers do rounds once a week. Teachers at Ballarat Clarendon College do rounds once every two weeks. Other networks do rounds once a month. Frequency matters.

Why Do Instructional Rounds?

Rounds are time-consuming, complex, and challenging. So why bother? Several educators I asked suggested the following reasons:

- *To take improvement to the next level*. In the California Rural Network, school districts had been engaged in improvement through Reading First and other efforts. As a result, they were experiencing improvements in student achievement. They believed they could take student and adult learning to the next level, but they weren't sure how to do it. Rounds have helped them build on their earlier improvement efforts.
- *To build a common understanding of effective learning and teaching.* Educators in the California Rural Network think that rounds are a valuable way to explore the following questions: Do we know what effective instruction looks like? Do we recognize it when we see it? Do we agree?
- *To reduce variability*. Educators at Ballarat Clarendon College do rounds "because we know there's a significant difference in levels of instruction among classrooms." They think rounds will help them reduce variability by focusing on tasks in classrooms and getting shared commitments about how to improve.
- *To focus the work.* Melissa Chen says that rounds help Lowell Middlesex Academy focus: "There are so many things we want to improve, and it helps to put more of our energy in one place, to choose one problem a year that we want to look at."
- *To put educators in charge of their own learning.* Judith Blanco sees rounds as building on Boston's previous coaching work. According to Blanco, it's "a way of getting teachers to observe one another's practice in a nonevaluative way. It's a process and structure to make that happen." Connie Tate of the California Rural Network explains,

> We're trying to build collective efficacy. It's really behavior modification: Tell me what to do, and I'm going to resist it, but give me time, let me do it and see the results . . . and I'll change my behavior.

- *To provide data and inform professional development.* Lowell Middlesex Academy uses rounds to inform professional development in a targeted way and create a feedback loop for teachers: "It's hard to plan professional development if we don't all agree on what we're seeing in our classrooms." Similarly, educators at one Boston high school said,

> The data from instructional rounds give us a more complete picture of student learning and bluntly show whether professional development has had an impact on student performance—[and] whether we have adequately addressed the problem of practice.

Ultimately, educators choose to do rounds because they find them a powerful way of continually informing and improving their practice. One educator in the California Rural Network captured her experience:

> We're finally having conversations about instructional practice. I've learned more about myself as a teacher and about quality instruction in one day of instructional rounds than in five years of professional development.

It's in Our Hands

Done poorly or briefly as just another initiative, rounds, like any improvement effort, will have little effect. At worst, poorly done rounds will suggest that we educators are incapable of improving our own practice. However, done well, in a way that is sustained, and integrated with an improvement strategy, rounds offer the opportunity for educators to show ourselves and others what we're capable of as professionals and to develop learning environments in which all students can succeed. EL

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[1]We build on the early work of Tony Alvarado, Elaine Fink, and colleagues in New York City District 2 and of Andrew Lachman, Richard Elmore, and colleagues in the Superintendents' Network of the Connecticut Center for School Change.

Reference

City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S. E., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving learning and teaching*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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