

Instructional Rounds

(Originally titled “Learning from Instructional Rounds”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Harvard author/researcher Elizabeth City describes “instructional rounds”, a medically-inspired protocol (similar to Lauren Resnick’s “learning walks”) in which a group of educators tours a school, zeroes in on strengths and weaknesses, and provides descriptive and analytic feedback. “Rounds are not about ‘fixing’ individual teachers,” says City. “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. The focus on ‘we’ means that peers learn to hold one another accountable, individually and collectively.” Here are the key steps to implementing this process:

- *Form a network.* An instructional rounds group might consist of superintendents visiting each others’ schools, a district’s principals, or a mixed group including teachers from within the school. The network establishes procedures, agrees on a common language, and makes a number of school visits over time.

- *Define a problem of practice.* This is “something the school cares about, feels stuck on, and wants to understand more deeply,” says City. “A problem of practice focuses on instruction, is observable and actionable, connects to a broader strategy of improvement, and is high-leverage” – for example, Are students engaged in high-level tasks? Are students able to articulate their thinking? Can students transfer their learning from one content area to another? Do students understand math at a conceptual as well as a procedural level? Are students active learners or are teachers doing most of the work? Are students with special needs performing up to their potential? Are teachers implementing high-level curricula in low-level ways? Are teachers effectively checking for understanding? Are students taking responsibility for the quality of their work? How do students talk to one another about classwork?

- *Observe in classrooms.* The observers divide into groups of four and each group visits four classrooms for 20-25 minutes each, focusing on the school’s problem of practice and paying particular attention to the “instructional core” – the interaction of students, teachers, and content. Observers ask themselves, *What are students doing and saying? What is the teacher doing and saying? What is the learning task?* They check in with students to see what they’re doing and thinking. The observers don’t fill out a checklist but make careful observations. “They’re detectives, not inspectors,” says City. “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.”

- *Debrief.* The observers then meet and, for the first time, share impressions with each other: first low-inference, just-the-facts descriptions of what they saw in classrooms; then analysis, looking for patterns and exceptions to the patterns; then prediction, asking questions like, “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?”

• *Identify the next level of work.* For example, a school that was concerned about a lack of higher-level student work might collect examples of teacher questions and classroom assignments and dedicate significant professional time to analyzing and strengthening the quality of classroom discourse.

“Done poorly or briefly as just another initiative, rounds, like any improvement effort, will have little effect,” says City. But done well, she believes rounds can be very helpful because they:

- Focus the work on one key issue;
- Build a common understanding of effective teaching and learning;
- Provide data to inform professional development;
- Put educators in charge of their own learning;
- Reduce variability between classrooms;
- Take improvement to the next level.

“Learning from Instructional Rounds” by Elizabeth City in *Educational Leadership*, October 2011 (Vol. 69, #2, p. 36-41); for purchase at

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx>