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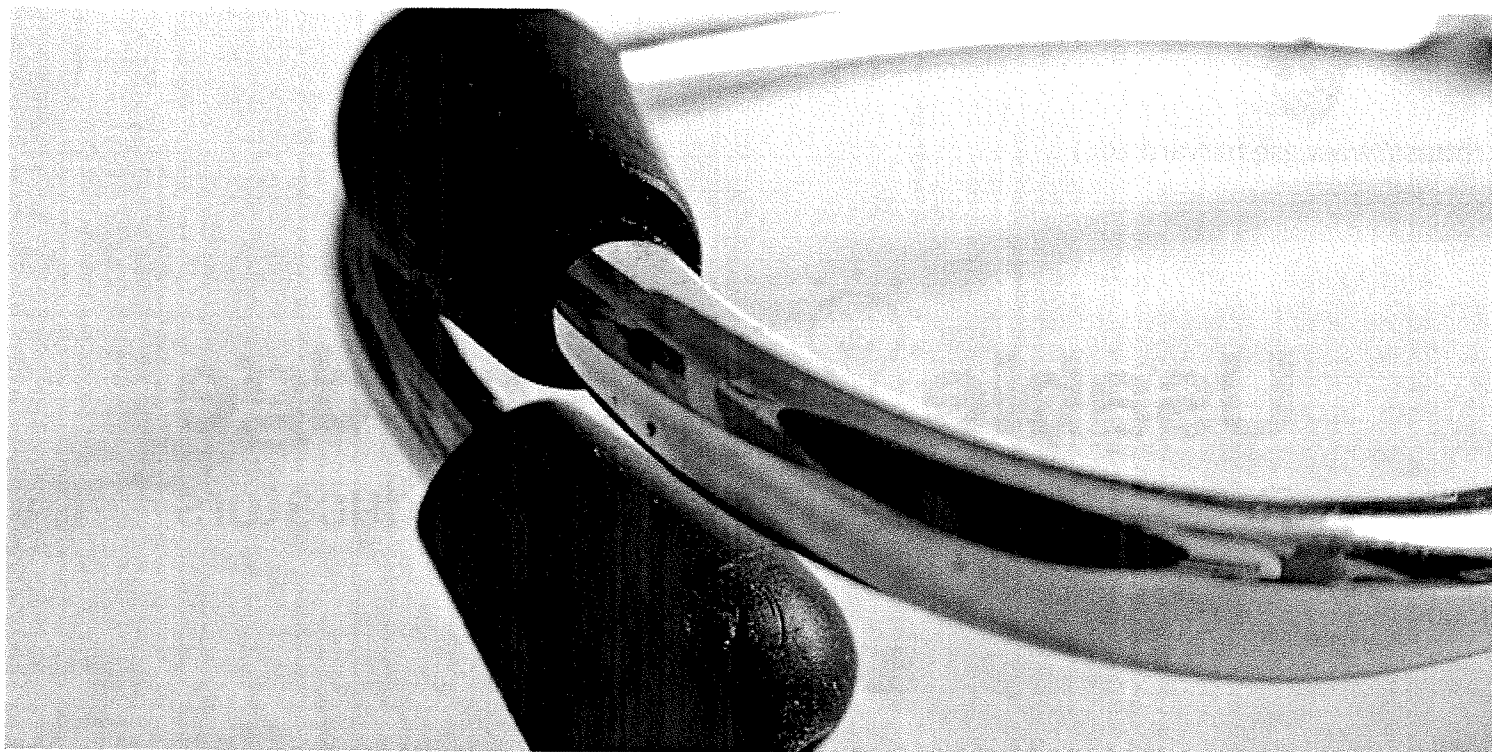
Treating the "Instructional Core": Education Rounds

A time-honored tradition borrowed from medical practice is helping school leaders gain new insights into teachers' work

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POSTED:
May 12, 2009

In the beginning pages of *Instructional Rounds in Education* (http://hepg.org/hep-home/books/instructional-rounds-in-education): *A Network Apprach to Teaching and Learning* (http://hepg.org/hep-home/books/instructional-rounds-in-education)— a book by Harvard Graduate School of Education (http://www.gse.harvard.edu/) faculty members Richard Elmore (/node/125842), Elizabeth City (/node/125692), and Lee Teitel (/node/127372), along with doctoral student and Cambridge school principal Sarah Fiarman — the authors remind their readers that "Teaching causes learning." While this might seem obvious, teaching is often the last focus of education — shifted to the side by standardized testing, changing curricula, faculty room politics, overbearing or aloof administrators, and shrinking school budgets. And yet, argue the book's authors, the "instructional core" — the essential interaction between teacher, student, and content that creates the basis of learning — is the first place that schools should look to improve student learning. Now a time-honored tradition borrowed from medical practice is helping school leaders gain new insights into teachers' work.

If you want to improve learning, you have to improve teaching

Outside of the teacher in a particular classroom, few people know much about what it going on inside that room. As a result, a school might have excellent teaching in one classroom, and lackluster teaching just next door. In part, that stems from a tradition of teacher autonomy, and in part, from a deeper separation of powers in the American education system: Administrators who flee from the classroom are rewarded with higher social status and dramatically higher pay. The result is that most principals and superintendents lose touch with the classroom. "There are only a handful of principals who feel like their work has anything to do with the instructional practice," says Elmore. "They are not good at it, they have not done it in a long time, that's not what they have gotten rewarded for." Elmore's efforts to change this began during his work in a New York City school district, where professional development for principals included spending time every day inside classrooms to re-familiarize themselves with the teaching environment. Each month, these principals would get together to talk about what they had seen and how they could improve quality of instruction in their schools. While the practice was helpful, it lacked a certain amount of rigor. Elmore expanded this concept — similar to

the medical rounds used in teaching hospitals — into a more formal practice of "instructional rounds" when asked to consult for a group of Connecticut superintendents who were meeting informally to talk about school performance. Since then, he and the other authors of the book have expanded the approach in different forms to the Cambridge, MA, district schools, as well as statewide in Ohio and Iowa .

Instructional rounds

The basic process is relatively simple. A network of superintendents, principals, teachers, and central office staff agree to meet at regular intervals, usually monthly, each time at a different school. They spend the morning circulating around classrooms, observing the teaching and learning that takes place there. Then, in an afternoon meeting, they debrief what they have seen. To prime their observations, they are asked to address a "problem of practice" the school has committed to solve, such as improving math proficiency or literacy, within the context of a "theory of action" the school has identified to achieve the goal. Theories of action might include increasing teacher knowledge, upping the complexity of the material students are asked to learn, and/or changing the way students are asked to learn that material. In the debriefing meeting, members are further asked to take four steps:

- *Describe* what they observed in class.

- *Analyze* any patterns that emerge.

- *Predict* the kind of learning they might expect from the teaching they observed.

- *Recommend the next level of work* that could help the school better achieve their desired goal.

Though the concept of rounds may seem straightforward, in reality, it is an extremely difficult program for participants to execute. The difficulty starts with the challenge of describing what they see without being judgmental. "In order to learn how to do it, they have to unlearn certain other things," says Elmore. "People are used to making snap judgments and saying what they like and don't like." Stepping back and determining what is actually happening in a classroom before judging what *should* be happening, however, is a crucial step to changing instruction for the better. "Rounds puts everybody in the learning mode and says we all need to figure this out together," says City. "It says let's take the evidence before us, see where we are, and see what we think we need to do next to make progress, instead of people with formal authority who are supposed to have all of the answers." The results can be surprising.

In one example presented in *Instructional Rounds*, four teachers were struggling to explain the difference in student achievement in their various classes. Because they were all teaching the same material, they figured the difference lay in variation in student preparation. After observing classrooms, however, it became clear the four teachers weren't "teaching the same thing" at all — in fact, they differed substantially in how much time they spent explaining the task, how they assigned roles to students in groups, and how they provided follow-up support to students facing difficulty. Observing those interactions made it clear that students in some classes were genuinely absorbing the material, while others were blindly following teacher instructions.

In another case in the Ohio network, participants observing AP chemistry classes found that, while the material in the classes was sufficiently difficult, instructors teaching the classes were asking mostly recall questions, rather than pushing students to think at more theoretical levels. The network then developed guidelines for teaching that would foster higher-order thinking across the district. "This wasn't us coming in from Harvard saying you're not doing this," says Teitel, "it was a totally home-grown list." Nor did it stop with encouraging teachers to foster higher-order thinking by releasing responsibility to their students and moving away from compliance-driven activities. A principal in the network realized that he couldn't expect teachers to make that shift, unless they experienced it as part of their interactions in his teacher meetings. And from there, a deputy superintendent at the table had the same realization about how she structured her meetings with the principals. "It was a great moment of shining connection from classroom to central office, changing the culture from one of compliance and fitting into expectations," says Teitel.

While difficult to draw a causal link between such practices and improved performance, the Cambridge school district saw its math scores improve after addressing the issue through rounds; during that review, participants found that while the district had implemented a challenging new curriculum, teachers lacked confidence in their own abilities to teach it. Providing more support helped improve both teacher confidence and student learning.

The value of the network

As powerful as such changes can be when they work, buy-in to the rounds process doesn't necessarily come easy. In order for rounds to work properly the focus must be on teaching — not teachers — with everyone in the room free to speak his or her mind and respect strict confidentiality for participants. In some systems, such as in Cambridge, the facilitators had to work with teachers unions to develop specific language so rounds would not be used as a way to evaluate and punish teachers. On the other side of the coin, sometimes the facilitators have struggled with groups that are reluctant to offer any criticism of colleagues, staying in what the authors call the "Land of Nice" during debriefings. That's where the value of the network comes in. As participants take turns hosting visits and offering and taking criticism, they develop trust in the process and one another. Greater candor also stems from the focus on description, rather than judgment, that grounds criticism in comments about observable phenomena in the class, rather than ad hominem judgments.

"We are relentless in focusing on description," says City. "People slip into their habits of using judgmental language pretty easily, so we build a community of people who call each other on that, so when somebody says, 'Oh, that was such a great classroom,' we say, 'What's the evidence?' We know we are making progress when they start calling each other on it instead of us doing it." Eventually, the goal is to change the culture of the school so this kind of observational learning becomes automatic. "If we're doing rounds so we act this way today but then the rest of the month we act differently, then we've still got work to do," says Teitel. "The idea is that they're actually taking some of the protocols and weaving them into the culture of the way they do other business." That includes giving networks the freedom to develop their own practices. Variations on the concept have already spread to other areas, including Boston, Chicago, New Jersey, and Australia. The authors hope that with the publication of the book, other networks will take the ideas and make them their own — adapting them as needed to their own purposes.

"I think a good result of the book is for people to say there are some things in here we'd like to try, and we are going to commit to try it," says Elmore. "I'd like to see people interrogate the process, and ask if it does help them achieve their goals."
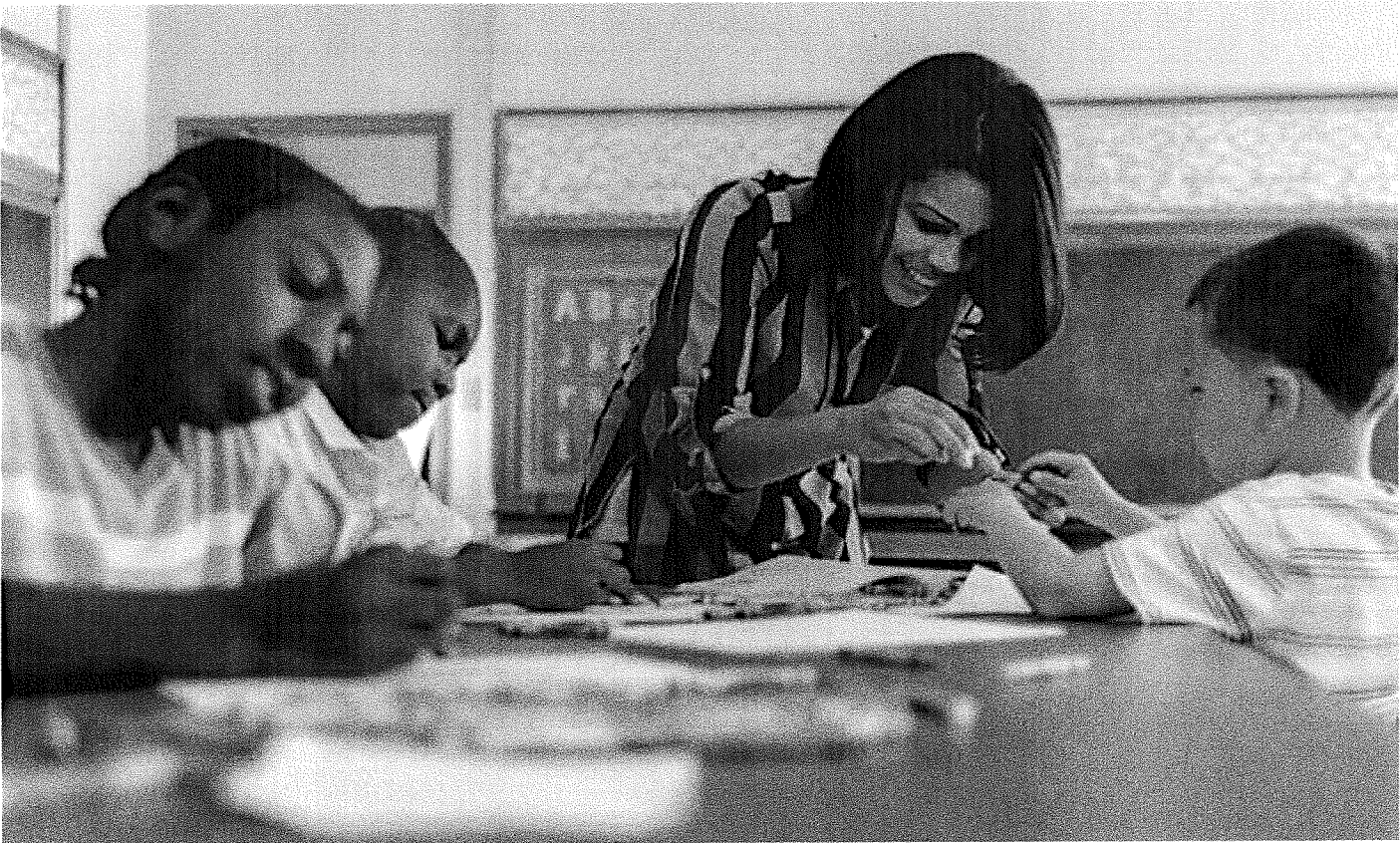
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