

WHAT MAKES A GOOD PROBLEM OF PRACTICE?



A resource booklet to complement Instructional Rounds

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Extracts from: *Instructional Rounds in Education*, City, E.A., Elmore, R.F., Fiarman, S.E. & Teitel, L

What the Purpose of Instructional Rounds?

Rounds has two primary goals that inform each other:

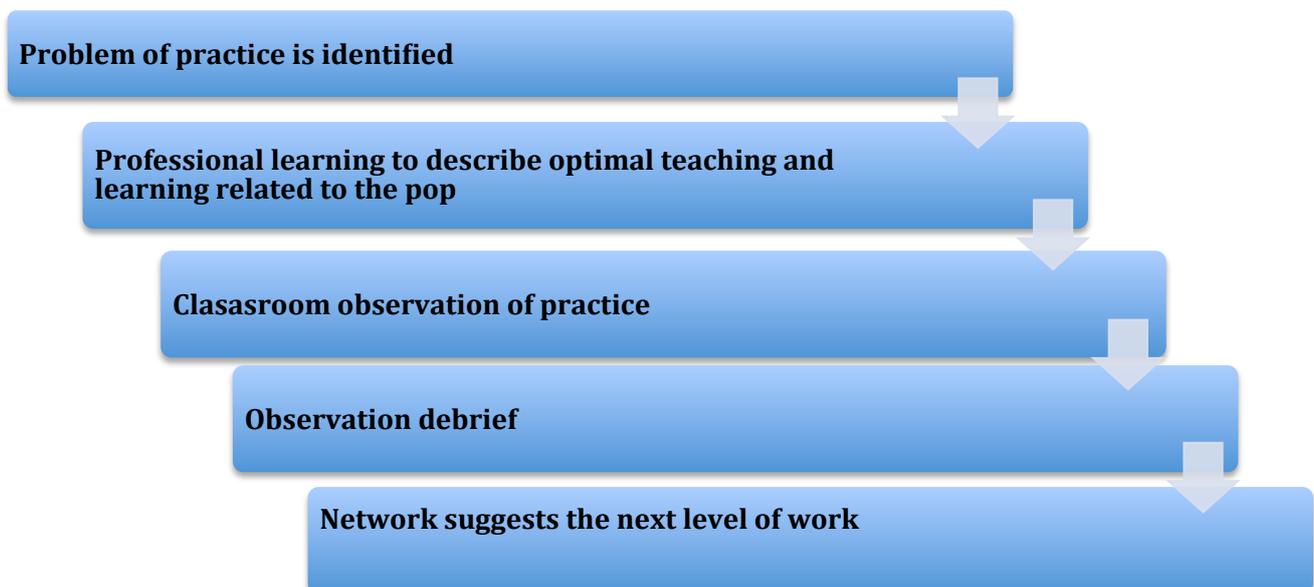
- 1. Build skills of network members by coming to a common understanding of effective practice and how to support it.*
- 2. Support instructional improvement at the host school by sharing what the network learns and by building skills at the local level (p100)*

What is a Problem of Practice?

A problem of practice is an aspect of teaching and learning that has been identified as the focus of the upcoming round. It needs to be one that:

- focuses on the instructional core,
- is directly observable,
- is actionable, and
- connects to a broader strategy of improvement – that is, links to one of the current strategic directions of the school.

Identifying a problem of practice is the first step and element of instructional rounds. *It is a critical component of rounds as it focuses the attention of the network – “Of all the things we could pay attention to in classrooms, we’re going to focus on”. It also makes it more likely that the visit will be fruitful learning for both the host and the network participants (p102).*



How is the Problem of Practice Identified?

The problem of practice is grounded in evidence and refined through dialogue.

In short, the problem of practice is something you care about and that would make a difference for student learning if you improved it.

Student learning data is a good place to start identifying the focus. The data could come from summative assessment or external results or it could come from teachers' collected evidence about students' engagement, curriculum understanding or skills, or facility with the general capabilities.

The problem of practice emerges through dialogue between the hosts and the facilitator:

- *The hosts brainstorm some possible problems of practice,*
- *The facilitator helps the hosts hone these possibilities into a draft problem that will be fruitful for both the hosts and the network,*
- *The hosts refine the draft, sometimes with more assistance from the facilitator (p104).*



WHAT MAKES A GOOD PROBLEM OF PRACTICE?

1. It's the Start of the Journey - Not the End

The problem of practice (pop) is the start of a school's journey in implementing change. It should be a focus that the school is committed to investing in as a priority for the 12 months following the round. By linking directly to the school plan, the pop should ensure that Instructional Rounds is not an "add on", but rather an integral part of the school's improvement program.

Instructional Rounds is not a process for checking how a change implementation has gone. There is a fine line between using rounds as an audit of whether people are doing what they're supposed to be doing (not okay) and using rounds to find evidence that the instructional core looks as it should if the problem of practice were met (okay). (p107)



Focus on the Learning not the Teaching

One simple strategy for shifting the conversation is to focus on the kind of learning you want to see, as opposed to what kind of teaching you expect to see – in short, focus on students, not on teachers. Sometimes, going back to the problem being addressed or the kind of learning you want to see can be helpful (eg we want students to be independent readers and writers) (p107).

There is a place for audit at a school level, and each school should embed ongoing data gathering processes to ensure the change process is successful.

Extend the Previous Focus

One school that we visited had invested heavily in professional learning around literacy strategies. They thought that neither the teachers nor the students had internalised the strategies, so after conversation it reframed what had initially been an implementation check to the following questions:

- ✓ *What literacy strategies are students using?*
- ✓ *In what ways do teachers teach literacy strategies?*

2. It's Answer in Unknown

"Problem"- late middle English originally denoting a riddle or a question for academic discussion

A problem of practice is a focus area of learning and teaching where the way forward is unknown. Leaders and teachers are aware that improvement is needed, but are unclear about what is limiting progress. It's an important aspect that leaders and teachers are pondering over and have not come up with clear solutions.

Examples of schools developing the pop are given on page 8. Asking yourself some questions might be a good way to start your thinking.

- Why is this area of focus important for your students?
- Why are you interested in checking on it?
- What data do you already have?

A good problem of practice is a leap into the unknown. . It is something students and staff are struggling with. Teachers will need training and continued support to address it in a meaningful way

3. It's High Leverage and/or Deep Learning

If acted on would this problem of practice make a significant difference for student learning?

High-leverage practices are actions central to teaching. Carried out skilfully, these practices increase the likelihood that teaching will be effective for students' learning. They are useful across a broad range of subject areas, grade levels, and teaching contexts.

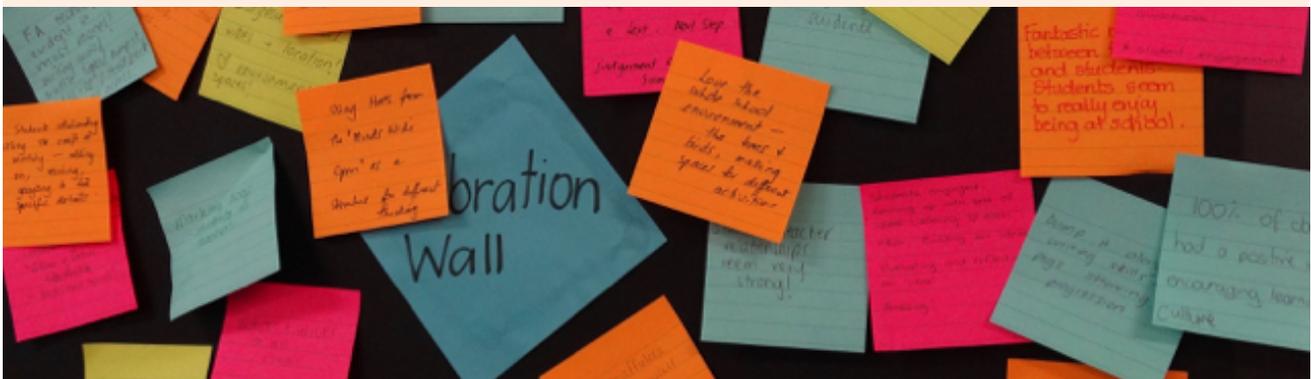
Some high leverage strategies have been identified through research. These include: effective feedback; using formative assessment; eliciting deep thinking; student and teacher questioning; planning rich tasks; engaging students "in-task", and establishing goals.

Deep learning is promoted through activities such as creative and critical thinking, substantive communication, applying understanding, reflection and metacognition It is also evident in the process skills of learning areas such as Working Mathematically & Working Scientifically.

4. It Doesn't Contain Too Much

It's common for host schools to want the network to look at many things, in part because we have several problems we care about at any given moment and it's hard to pick one. At the beginning, networks will struggle to handle multi-dimensional problems. After gaining some experience, networks might be able to keep three questions in mind.

To help refine the pop, ask yourself: "What is the one problem that is at the root of all others?" What are the main issues that you care most about? or "What do you think will have the highest leverage in helping your teachers change their practice to meet student learning needs?" (p107)



5. It's Both Specific and Transferrable

The more specific the pop is, the more specific and helpful the observational data & recommendations for the next level of work will be. Vague problems of practice lead to vague observations & recommendations. For instance, a problem of practice that asks, "What are our teachers doing and saying?" is too broad.

On the other hand, if the pop is too narrow, it limits the generalizability of the data. Just as we need to ensure students make connections in their learning, so we need to ensure that our teachers have the ability to make connections in their learning. For instance, a problem of practice that asks, "How effective is our teacher feedback in the teaching of spelling?" Would provide data that is too specific for a priority change program.

Just as for Goldilocks, the grain-size needs to be "just right".

6. It meets the needs of all the network participants as well as the host school

Sometimes networks fall into the trap of developing a problem of practice solely around the needs of a host school. And they frame a problem of practice solely around that.

City et al say:

This is a laudable but important goal, but it is not the only goal. Rounds

visits help the network develop as a group that, over time, builds a rich sense of what they hope to see in classrooms, agreement about what they are actually seeing, and strategies for how they make that hope a reality.

Rounds also helps all the individuals in the network, whether they are the host of a visit or a colleague participating in the visit, sharpen their understanding of the instructional core and their personal theory of action about their role in improving it.

If rounds does not meet all these goals, the network won't last long. It takes a lot of time and energy to participate in rounds, and if the only benefit were to the host, that would probably not be enough to sustain participants.



What are Some Examples of a Good Problem of Practice?

A document from Columbia City Schools gives examples of how problem of practices have been selected. Here are two examples:

High Expectations. Achievement data indicates our students are generally not performing at the level needed to meet state standards. Data from our CRTs and walkthroughs indicate that students are held to different expectations in different settings and, at times, the expectations are too low. Teachers are unsure of what students are capable of. Teachers fear that if they set their expectations too high, students will be frustrated by the challenge. The staff has decided to learn ways to build scaffolding activities into their lessons so students get the support they need to meet higher expectations.

Problem of Practice: What evidence of high expectations for all students do you see in the kinds of tasks students are asked to do and in the work they produce? Do you see evidence of high expectations in student participation in the lesson? What is the teacher doing that sends a message of both high expectations and student support promoting academic achievement for all students?

Building a community of learners by focusing on productive student group work. Low student achievement across content areas and lack of student interest in learning suggest that we need to investigate different instructional approaches. The staff is aware of research on the effectiveness of students working in groups, both on achievement and attitude toward learning. The staff has found that its efforts to design and implement projects involving students working together have resulted in chaos and little productive learning. The staff is struggling with how to design and implement productive lessons which are focused on students working collaboratively

Problem of Practice: How are groups working? Are students helping each other learn? Is learning a mutual endeavour in groups? What level of significant learning do you see for both groups and individuals? How do the assignments support effective group learning? What teacher behaviours support productive group learning?

Examples of problems of practice conducted in some Sydney-based networks can be found at: <https://www.creatinggrounds.com> and <https://www.ccgedu.net>