Implementing and Sustaining Peer-to-Peer Instructional Rounds

Standards-based instructional rounds and peer coaching will energize your school culture, build teacher morale, and ultimately, boost student learning.

By Learning Sciences International
Introduction

One of the more positive recent shifts we have seen in public education is that teachers are becoming less isolated than ever before. No longer do teachers have to go it alone behind closed classroom doors. Our core values now include the notion that “all of our students belong to all of us.” States have common standards and assessments, districts have common curriculum, and schools have common standards-based learning targets and performance scales. Teachers co-teach; they share students for Multi-Tiered systems of support; they plan lessons together; and in a best-case scenario, they share a common vision of effective instructional practice.

Opportunities for mentoring and peer coaching are proliferating as schools begin to build strong standards-based Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Learning Team Meetings (LTM), and Common Planning time. Some schools have repurposed department or grade-level meetings as PLCs. This renewed focus on collaboration is in line with what school systems around the world have found to be most effective for supporting student achievement.

What the Research Says

University of Michigan and Vanderbilt University researchers recently concluded a massive study of 9,000 teachers in the Miami-Dade County Public School System to find out how teachers collaborate and why they do it. (Ronfeldt, Grissom, Farmer, McQueen, 2015)

Reviewing their research, Michael Hart (2015) noted that “Almost 90 percent of the teachers surveyed said that the collaboration they find in working as instructional teams was helpful in improving student learning.” The study drew a seemingly simple, but extremely important conclusion: “Teachers get better when they work together.” (Hart, 2015)

Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2010) have reported that teachers in South Korea, Japan, and Singapore spend about 35% of their time instructing students, with the rest of their time spent on other teaching tasks. They often share a large workroom and office space, which allows for the interchange of ideas and resources. Denmark, Norway, Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, and other countries regularly provide for time within the school week for teachers to work together. In Finland, a leader in international student achievement scores, teachers typically meet together one afternoon each week to jointly plan and develop curriculum and assessments. Contrast this with common U.S. practice, where, “Instructional delivery consumes about 80% of U.S. teachers’ total working time, as compared to about 60% for teachers in these other nations” (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, 2010, p. 3).
Implementing Instructional Rounds for Peer Coaching

Activities associated with peer-to-peer instructional rounds are some of the most valuable tools a school or district can use to enhance teachers’ practice and develop a culture of collaborative learning.

Instructional rounds for peer coaching are one of the most valuable tools a school or district can use to enhance teachers’ practice and develop a culture of collaborative learning. The primary purposes of peer-to-peer classroom visits is to develop teachers’ capacity for discussing and analyzing the practices they have seen and to help them engage in deep professional dialogue as part of a structured learning process (Marzano, 2011). Peer-to-peer instructional rounds are a more focused type of learning than typical instructional rounds: The activities have specific processes, parameters, and structures that support and provide comfort for peers to engage in instructional rounds and coaching with confidence and competence. Teachers can visit their peers’ classrooms in small teams, such as PLCs, or they can work as partners to visit each other and provide feedback on specific strategies they have chosen for growth.

In either case, participating in peer-to-peer instructional rounds accelerates teacher growth. Peer-led instructional rounds begin with teachers who are willing to open their classrooms to their colleagues. In most schools, this willingness requires a cultural shift, and it is not a shift that can be forced or hurried. One principal we know began instructional rounds with a small group of three willing teachers; that group eventually grew to include all staff. She recalls the gradual shift of her school’s culture over time. “The culture started shifting from being one of, ‘I’m in isolation in my room and sometimes I might talk to my team members to total collaboration,” she remembers. “I could see the courtyard from my office and notice teachers stopping each other and sharing strategies. It was really just becoming the way of life.”
A non-intrusive, teacher-led way of improving practice that turns a whole staff into practicing coaches.

Another principal we partnered with invented a novel concept: She paired up “teaching buddies” to help build a collaborative learning culture. She strategically assigned, as a starting point, each teacher a buddy who taught an adjacent grade level. The pair of teachers was responsible for setting up mutual observations and feedback sessions once a semester (the principal made arrangements to cover their classes). During the classroom visit, observing teachers focused on a pre-selected teaching strategy and used an electronic coaching tool, the LSI Growth Tracker, to provide feedback electronically for the teacher on his or her instruction. Most teachers then scheduled face-to-face debriefing sessions. Across the board, peer observations and coaching were extremely popular, and after initial planning, the principal could step back and allow the teachers to take the reins. It was a non-intrusive, teacher-led way of improving practice, and it turned the whole staff into practicing coaches. This principal reflects on the process:

*The feedback I received from the teachers was so positive that many teachers asked for more coverage time to conduct more visits. Listening to teachers share the positive comments about other teachers’ practices was very exciting. It created a real synergy among the staff, and it also raised the level of respect that peers had for each other. I would also say it gave teachers the opportunity to see that they were not in this learning curve alone. This process truly raised the level of collegiality among staff and helped us move forward with the professional development process.*
Two Goals of Peer-to-Peer Rounds

City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (2009), among others, have identified instructional rounds as a powerful practice for supporting instructional improvement. Yet in our work, we have seen little evidence that schools are utilizing rounds widely or with the necessary focus and specificity of purpose.

There are two goals of instructional rounds activities. The first is to provide feedback to the teacher being visited on specific instructional strategies that the teacher has chosen to practice and refine. A secondary purpose is for visiting teachers to compare and analyze their own instructional practices. Ultimately, teachers will make intentional changes in their pedagogy: They discover what they need to start doing and also what they need to stop doing. The chief benefit of this approach resides in the discussion that takes place among teachers at the end of the classroom visit, as well as in subsequent self-reflection.

As teachers build trust and forge strong relationships, they become more comfortable with inviting their peers into their classrooms. The process inspires teachers to keep improving as they begin to own their professional growth. As one principal told us:

"The teachers just continue to sharpen their skills. They're never satisfied. There's always something more they feel they could do. That level of reflective practice, I haven't seen that anywhere else."

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The LSI Growth Tracker: Technology Support for Collaboration and Reflection

The teachers we work with on peer-to-peer instructional rounds and activities support their work with a technology-based professional growth and collaboration tool, the LSI Growth Tracker. The software provides a safe place to learn, grow, and collaborate with peers. Teachers chart their own course for learning, choosing specific instructional areas to focus on for growth. The tool allows them to track their growth and receive feedback from designated peers in a safe, evaluation-free setting, where teachers have full control over who views their progress.

The LSI Growth Tracker also provides job-embedded professional development. Designed to be delivered in small chunks during the course of a normal working day, the professional development (PD) modules allow for flexibility and differentiation of PD. This function of the Growth Tracker supports teachers as they implement, monitor, and adapt specific instructional strategies that have a proven impact on student learning. As teachers complete modules with the support of a peer or peers, they earn professional development credit as part of their normal workday.

Moreover, unlike “sit and get” PD that requires teachers to find substitutes and travel from campus, the Growth Tracker provides tailored professional development of classroom instruction that will transfer immediately into classroom practice, with built-in systems for peer feedback and reflection. In other words, teachers begin to practice their learning immediately, with the support they need to make it stick.

School leaders work hard to make sure teachers get training and focused support, but time constraints make it difficult to do everything optimally. The Growth Tracker quickly guides teachers through high-quality professional learning—without exhausting valuable resources or interrupting student learning. Built to meet The national Standards for Professional Learning, the Growth Tracker can also make new teacher inductions and recertification programs virtually hassle-free.

To learn more about peer-to-peer instructional rounds and the LSI Growth Tracker, download our informational brochure here: http://www.learningsciences.com/Lsitracker/growth-tracker/ or call us at 877.411.7114.
Bibliography


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