

The "Rounds" Model of Professional Development

by Thomas Del Prete

Begun in the fall of 1994, the Clark University-Worcester Public Schools K-16 PDS Collaborative joins the University with the Goddard and Hiatt elementary schools, the Sullivan Middle School, and South High School. A new secondary PDS (grades 7-12), the University Park Campus School, will begin in the fall of 1997. The "rounds" model of professional development has played an important role in the work of the Collaborative.

The concept of "rounds" is borrowed from the training model used in teaching hospitals, in which interns and a teaching doctor together visit patients and review, discuss, and do research relevant to each case. We have adapted this concept as part of our overall effort to engage university and school teachers and prospective teachers in reflective and productive dialogue on children's learning and corresponding teaching practice. It helps fulfill our broad goal of building a professional learning community which acknowledges and respects a teacher's experience, and which views adult learning in schools, no less than children's, as a vital and continuous process. It likewise meets our idea of a professional learning culture focused on understanding and enhancing the teaching-learning process in its actual context.

Our version of rounds engages small groups of school-based and/or university teachers and/or teacher education students in understanding the teaching-learning process at work within a particular learner group at a particular point in time. A professional development round is pre-arranged. The rounds group receives an orientation regarding the classroom activity from the host teacher(s), observes and/or participates in it in some well-defined way, and reflects and discusses it afterwards. A round might focus on a particular area of teaching practice, on a particular approach in implementing a particular curriculum, on understanding children's learning process and knowledge-building in a particular context, or on all three of these domains of classroom activity at once. A round might also serve simply as a way to share and reflect on one's teaching practice with colleagues, an opportunity to develop meaningful conversation about teaching and learning and educational purpose on the basis of shared experience.

Rounds are integrated throughout our programs. Teacher education students are introduced to the rounds process prior to student teaching while taking courses which are collaboratively designed and taught by school and university faculty, and which are conducted in

whole or in part at our PDS sites. Practicing teachers normally provide this initial exposure to rounds, with students taking responsibility for a round at least once with a small group of peers. During student teaching, students typically take weekly turns conducting rounds, hosting a group of approximately 4-6 fellow students, together with 2 or 3 school and university faculty. Master's students seeking advanced teacher certification status also lead rounds regularly. Their involvement in rounds not only enhances these students' understanding and development of teaching practice, but helps prepare them as potential leaders in a collaborative professional culture intent on inquiring into and improving classroom learning.

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Many of our PDS teachers conduct rounds apart from their effort to support the development of teacher education students. Teachers working in teams on new curriculum projects, for instance, host small groups of colleagues for rounds. At our middle school PDS, teachers in the science department collaborated on a series of three consecutive rounds with different groups of learners involved in the same learning project. Reflecting on the learning they observed, the teachers decided during each successive round to shift greater responsibility to learners for defining and carrying out the learning investigation. The rounds process gave them the collective confidence to consider and act on new possibilities for student engagement.

Once a round has been scheduled, the host teacher/rounds leader prepares a "Rounds Sheet." Teacher education students receive help in this process from school or university faculty as needed. The Rounds Sheet generally addresses three different areas: background information, the learning activity focus, and questions pertaining to the teaching-learning process which will help focus post-round discussion. Usually 2-3 paragraphs, the background section of a Rounds Sheet gives context and perspective to the round, providing the rounds group with a clear sense of the rationale for

the learning activity—the learning and assessment that has preceded it, its place in the unfolding of the curriculum, relevant theory and research, etc. After a brief summary of the learning activity itself, the Rounds Sheet also provides a set of questions (usually 3-5) that reflect the central concerns of the rounds leader for this learning activity. Questions such as the following frequently appear: “*Are the children demonstrating an understanding of (a specific concept) in group discussion—what evidence is there?*” or “*Did the teacher’s questions show respect for children’s thinking and engage them in thinking more deeply about content?*”

Having prepared a Rounds Sheet, the rounds leader conducts a “Pre-Round Orientation,” usually just prior to the start of the round. The orientation might be as short as 5 or as long as 20 minutes, and sometimes involves a careful illustration of the learning activity. Occasionally, questions posed by members of the rounds group during the orientation result in an adjustment of some sort in the learning activity. The Pre-Round Orientation also makes clear what interactive role, if any, members of the rounds team might take with learners during the learning activity. During the actual round, which typically lasts between 30 and 60 minutes, members of the rounds team record observations germane to the rounds questions. They often give their written notes to the rounds leader at the conclusion of the round.

The rounds leader initiates post-round discussion based on her or his own observations and the focal questions of the round. Members of the rounds team respond and add concrete observations of their own. This reflective period, usually ranging from 15 to 30 minutes long, challenges participants to be both respectful and helpful, to consider concretely what happened, to discern and offer information which sheds light on the actual learning that has taken place, and then, if appropriate, to suggest alternative scenarios and compelling reasons for them.

We have a general set of “rounds questions” that we sometimes use to guide post-round reflection. These questions focus attention on what we view as critical areas and priorities in teaching-learning: the development of classrooms as learning communities, the development of habits of mind, the development of meaningful and engaging curriculum (consistent with our state and district curriculum frameworks), the introduction of modes of learning which accommodate diverse students.

What distinguishes a “round” from other professional development activity is that it occurs in the actual context of teaching and learning, it draws on and encourages investigation and reflection on teachers’ and

learners’ experience, it provides a shared experience as a basis for conversation, and it brings to bear interactively the different perspectives and expertise of different participants in the reflection process. Its meaningfulness lies in the collaborative way in which it involves teachers as professional and adult learners, and particularly in its direct relation to teachers’ experience and practice, and, in turn, to the children to whom teachers are dedicated. It builds professional community through processes of inquiry and reflection.

Testifying to these qualities of the rounds experience, several master’s students offer the following perspectives:

- *“The most valuable aspect of rounds is the chance to see my peers in action. I hold them in high regard and value the chance to learn from them. It is also vital for me to have their feedback regarding my teaching. It carries the interactive approach of our pedagogy into our own professional development practice.”*
- *“Rounds are helpful because others tell me things that have occurred that I otherwise wouldn’t notice.”*
- *“Rounds are an excellent way to observe others in a classroom learning environment. Not only are they beneficial for the observers, but they are also a wonderful way to gain feedback from your peers. They allow teachers to share ideas and information that would otherwise go unsaid. In that way, they are an excellent form of professional communication and modeling.”*

In our professional development school collaborative, “rounds” have become more and more a customary and expected part of professional learning. They reflect a shift in the professional learning culture of these schools—a shift towards more collaborative relationships, towards reflective dialogue, research, and study, and towards a process of open, active, and continuous expansion of professional knowledge. In such developing “learning-centered” schools, adults, no less than children, strive to learn how to learn together and how to make their learning continuous and fruitful for themselves and their learning community.

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