

# Learning Rounds

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## **Context**

Leadership has been a key focus of Scottish education in recent years. This has resulted in a number of innovative developments: the International Thought Leaders programme; visits by Scottish school leaders to the Harvard International Leadership School; coaching initiatives taking off in all local authorities; a revised Standard for Headship and a number of flexible routes to attaining it; and throughout the country a range of innovative and thoughtful programmes to develop leadership at all levels. Learning Rounds draws on all these initiatives, pulling together different strands into a programme that is targeted at developing system wide school improvement throughout Scotland.

## **Changing the Practice of Teachers**

What causes teachers, as individuals or members of team or school communities, to change the way they practice? This question is of essential importance because what teachers do has a direct and lasting impact on the learning of children. Moreover with roughly half of all local authorities' budgets spent on children's education and welfare, and a national commitment to creating a smarter and healthier Scotland, we must ensure maximum impact from this investment.

To achieve effective learning for all children we must develop deep understanding among teachers, senior school staff and local authority personnel, about what works and what doesn't, and how sustainable change can be implemented across systems. This is change not just at the level of the individual teacher, but across whole groups of teachers, a range of schools and across an authority. We must accept the challenge posed by MacBeath & Mortimore (2001) when they state, 'We have entered a new millennium with sophisticated science and spectacular technology, but still without the knowledge of how to educate all our children.'

School and authority leaders, who are responsible for spending large amounts of money on schools, must develop better levels of understanding regarding exactly what makes a difference and what has highest impact in terms of all pupils' education. To achieve this, school and authority staff must get back into the classroom to look at and learn about the practice of Learning and Teaching. This may seem strange. It seems fairly intuitive that teachers in particular spend most of their time in the classroom. But they are by and large on their own and as Elmore says, 'Privacy of practice produces isolation; isolation is the enemy of improvement' [p.20].

Routinely and traditionally, observation of practice has a monitoring purpose; there is usually an evaluative function attached to observation by a senior colleague, such as an inspector, a senior school leader or a member of an authority quality audit process team. This may offer little more than a snapshot of current practice, and does not always lead to a better understanding of strategies which can be employed to effect large-scale practice improvement. It can be productive, but we are also now seeing Scottish schools that are breaking the mould by developing opportunities for peer observation, or observation where a colleague, regardless of their seniority or role, acts as “coach” and so blurs the distinction between “leader” and “led”

However, all of these processes are based on the tradition that observation is done by a single individual. What we don't have in Scotland is a tradition of observation by a group of colleagues. This group observation lies at the heart of Learning Rounds, and takes us away from an isolated observer viewing practice into something altogether different.

### **What is the Learning Rounds model?**

Learning Rounds is a process that is designed to deliver system wide improvement across schools and authorities. It involves groups of staff observing and learning about and from school practice. The unique feature of this approach is that observation and enquiry are not carried out by a lone individual but by a team of colleagues who create a base of evidence around what they have seen. This evidence is descriptive only. It is not shaped by evaluative comments or value-laden points. While the collection of evidence can be done through talking to teacher and pupils, looking at pupil work or doing a ‘walk-thru’, the most common form of enquiry is through lesson observation. It is important to note that everyone involved in this process, whether observing or being observed, are volunteers, and that the focus is on the learning of the observing group, not on the feedback given to an individual observed teacher.

Learning Rounds involves a team of staff visiting a volunteer school to explore an issue that has been identified by the school as important to all of them e.g. Improving Learning and Teaching, raising literacy levels and so on. Groups of staff will watch a sequence of class lessons from different teachers over part of a day. For instance, a group of three colleagues might spend the morning in a school observing segments of lessons in a particular year group, focusing on an agreed area of practice, such as the level of challenge through teacher questioning. If more people are involved they can be split into two groups and each group can visit a different class for the first half of the lesson and then swap round for the second half. This alternating can continue through the morning until a number of episodes of class teaching have been observed. By the end of the morning teams both groups will have seen the same classes with the same teacher but at different times.

Each set of observations is followed by rich discussion in the afternoon that develops further learning. Here members of the group share their collective experiences. Because staff have observed the same lesson doesn't mean that they have understood and interpreted the same things. It is this process of joint reflection that is so important to the learning of all involved and moves Learning Rounds away from the tradition of an observer giving an observed teacher advice and guidance, onto the equally important area of shared learning, and of next steps which are identified from agreed evidence.

Crucially at this stage group members are **not** allowed opinions or suggestions as Elmore has found that this can lead to early disagreement and get in the way of next steps. Instead the process concentrates on getting consensus on the exact nature of the evidence in order to provide an agreed and descriptive platform to generate improvement. The visiting team then present their evidence to the school, be it the Head Teacher or the staff who were observed, or the Director. At this stage there is no evaluative comment, no suggestions as to next steps or what should be considered for change. The team's evidence is all about what has been observed and only what has been observed.

In response to the evidence the school and/or the host authority draw up a list of next steps, which is presented on a return visit of the team. In this joint forum, group members with the host school/authority colleagues discuss the next steps and offer evaluative opinions on the plans. This meeting is designed to be a significant driver for change in order to lay a platform for improvement and can lead to an amended and innovative next steps programme which continues to have the engagement of the team and which can change in the light of new evidence though further optional visits.

The emphasis throughout is on an **evidence-based** process, which leads to a continuous updating of practice. The key is that a group of colleagues are learning in a joint enquiry through mediated discussions and support. As a result of being involved in the process, colleagues, both those observed and those observing, develop and deepen their understanding of how to deliver effective system wide change. This has major benefits to the school or schools visited as well as the schools of those doing the visiting. More importantly the process generates evidence that can be applied across a number of schools in an authority.

The Learning Rounds model being developed in Scotland owes its inspiration to the pioneering work of Professor Richard Elmore of the University of Harvard. Using a 'medical rounds' model, Elmore brings groups of staff to investigate specific aspects of school improvement in order to generate strategies that can be used to improve practice. A good source of insight into Elmore's ideas can be found at <http://www.shankerinstitute.org/Downloads/building.pdf>  
More information on 'medical rounds' can be found in the addendum.

## **Extending the Learning Rounds Framework**

The basic structure of Learning Rounds is open to all sorts of variations and developments. The Scottish Government Schools Directorate has agreed to set up 4 tightly managed and closely linked pilots designed to develop system wide school improvement in Scotland through variations on the basic Learning Rounds model over the next eighteen months. These are:

**1. System-wide improvement at directorate level.** Through a Director Professional Learning Community, this project will explore some of the territory that Elmore pioneered with superintendents in the USA. Its clear focus will be on system wide change at an authority level. It will explore the process of getting directors directly involved in a hands-on enquiry. The Directors involved in the project represent the following authorities: East Renfrewshire, Falkirk, Midlothian, North Lanarkshire, South Ayrshire and West Lothian

**2. Improving school effectiveness in learning and teaching.**

Teachers within a school or an associated schools group will develop a joint enquiry around identified aspects of Learning and Teaching, for instance, raising attainment of all pupils by developing higher order questioning skills to pupils of all abilities.

**3. School wide improvement, supported at authority level.**

This pilot will focus on school wide improvement and will use a combination of people from different schools within one authority, for instance, heads, deputies and/or principal teachers to investigate an identified area of school improvement.

**4. Aspiring Headteachers.**

This model of improvement is aimed at those aspiring to become Headteachers and will involve a number of colleagues in a Learning Rounds approach to their own leadership practice.

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## **Additional information**

All projects will involve a group of about 6 to 8 colleagues who will form a Collegiate Learning Community (CLC) which will explore practice at school level through school visits. Project 1 has signed up 6 Directors. We anticipate that project 2 will largely be made up of teaching colleagues, while project 3 will be composed of various colleagues from across schools in an authority supported by an officer. Project 4 will be made up of aspiring headteachers. The groups and the visits will be fully supported and mediated by the **Scottish Centre for Studies in School Administration (SCSSA)** based in the University of Edinburgh, with additional support from the **National CPD Team**.

There are major benefits to being part of any of the groups. These include:

- a focus on generating evidence based solutions to key issues facing teachers, schools and education authorities around issues of system wide improvement,
- an opportunity for colleagues to get close to practice as part of a supportive and joint learning enquiry,
- a collaborative learning process to assist the group to explore practice and challenge assumptions,
- support through SCSSA with materials and access to the latest research on system wide improvement,
- a unique and powerful form of personal professional development for each colleague that will develop a self-reflective approach.

The challenge in all the pilots is to develop ground breaking improvement work in Scottish schools. By bringing together groups of staff to investigate specific aspects of school improvement strategies will be generated that can be used to transform the performance of schools across areas.

SCSSA in partnership with the national CPD Team will support all 3 pilots around the '**Learning Rounds**' approach. SCSSA will be responsible for initial training, on-going support, development of protocols, regular dissemination of information and, crucially, support the processes of mediation that underpin the work. The projects will be shaped and developed through on-going action research, and the groups involved in each pilot will change and modify processes in response to the Scottish context. If you want to find out more about Learning Rounds or to sign up for the Learning Rounds newsletter contact [graham.thomson@ed.ac.uk](mailto:graham.thomson@ed.ac.uk)

## **Addendum: Medical Rounds**

The development of Learning Rounds borrows from the system of hospital 'medical rounds'. Traditionally in 'medical rounds' a group of trainee doctors follow an experienced colleague on his or her rounds in a hospital to generate evidence based medical action and as a platform for learning.

Gathering by a patient's bedside, the doctors as a group begin to explore the evidence that is presented. This evidence can take a variety of forms e.g. patient charts, medical test data, physical examination and questioning of the patient around the symptoms that she or he exhibits.

A key characteristic of the model is that the doctors are part of a team. The senior doctor's role is crucial and gives structure to the whole process. S/he:

- mediates the conversation
- guides the group to key questions
- does not give solutions at first
- introduces evidence that may be missed and so on.

The senior doctor encourages the other doctors to use a descriptive voice in the initial phase of the model. This helps focus on **evidence only** and restricts the temptation for colleagues to come up with prescriptions of treatment, or next steps, before the evidence is fully explored.

Through mediating the conversation the senior doctor establishes among the group a consensus on the evidence.

Only when this has been achieved does the senior doctor allow the conversation to move from the descriptive phase to an evaluative one, from description of the evidence to discussion of next steps in the treatment. Once agreement has been reached a treatment is then put into action.

The doctors then return at a later date to determine whether the treatment is effective by again focusing on the evidence and whether the evidence suggests amendments are required in the treatment plan.

This in a nutshell is the basis of Learning Rounds and as the following report suggests, interesting things begin to happen when you get colleagues together to both view and discuss their practice.

### **Heart By-pass Death Rate Drops 25% When Surgeons Share Know-How**

- Twenty-three practicing surgeons and their staff in 3 New England states observed one another in the operating room and shared their know-how.
- “We didn’t invent anything new; we got better at doing things we already do”.
- Seventy-four patients who were expected to die did not.
- Outside experts who praised the work said it will be hard to get doctors to change...
- Researchers believe the methods could be applied in other fields.

Research conducted at Dartmouth Medical School  
Lebanon, N.H.  
March 1996

### **References**

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Buckingham: Open University Press