

Changing teachers, changing teaching: Exploring the relationships among teachers' perceptions of Quality Teaching Rounds, their teaching, and their identity as teachers

Jennifer Gore
The University of Newcastle
Jenny.Gore@newcastle.edu.au

Julie Bowe
The University of Newcastle
Julie.Bowe@newcastle.edu.au

Wendy Elsworth
The University of Newcastle
Wendy.Elsworth@newcastle.edu.au

Much is invested, rhetorically and increasingly financially, in the capacity of professional learning to support teacher growth (King & Newmann, 2001; Vandenberghe, 2002; Frampton & Vaughn, 2003; Sparks, 2004). In many cases, however, “professional learning” is poorly defined and poorly enacted and “teacher growth” is assumed rather than analysed. This paper is the third in a series of papers reporting findings from the Effective Implementation of Pedagogical Reform (EIPR) project, an ongoing study designed to test the extent to which high quality implementation of pedagogical reform can make a substantial difference in changing teachers' understanding and teaching practice.

The key feature of the pedagogical reform intervention in the EIPR study is “Quality Teaching Rounds”, an approach we have developed that brings together three professional development approaches – professional learning community, instructional rounds and Quality Teaching – and involves a small group of teachers working together to improve their professional knowledge and their capacity to collectively diagnose teaching practice (see Paper 1). In this paper, we analyse professional learning in terms of our Quality Teaching Rounds approach, and explore the impact of this intervention on how teachers see themselves as teachers and how they see their teaching, including any changes in the quality of their teaching practice. The research reported in this paper focuses on 28 teachers in our sample for whom we have data on the quality of their classroom teaching practice, as measured by the three dimensions of the Quality Teaching framework as well as interview and/or reflective journal data from 2009.

Participants completed journals as a part of the Quality Teaching Rounds process in which they were asked to reflect on their learning and the professional learning process in which they were engaged. Interviews were used to explore the teachers' initial experience of the Quality Teaching Rounds and, in particular, what teachers understood to be the productive conditions that supported their learning. While acknowledging the limitations associated with self-reports (Supovitz and Turner, 2000), the data suggest that the Quality Teaching Rounds approach is having a profound impact on teachers who almost universally report greater confidence, improved practice, greater collegiality, and renewed energy as teachers. They also report significant impact on school culture, student engagement and the quality of work students are producing in class.

Three key themes pertaining to the impact of Quality Teaching Rounds were identified from systematic analysis of the interview transcripts and journals and are used as the organisational framework for this paper. These inter-related themes are (1) teaching publicly; (2) using a shared language to talk about pedagogy; and (3) the importance of collegial relationships.

Teaching Publicly

What appears to have challenged the teachers the most was the act of teaching in front of their peers. While this was reported as at first daunting and harrowing for some, there was universal regard for the benefits that had come from this process, including affirmation of one's own teaching practice, learning from others, an openness to change, and new insights about students.

Well, I think the whole notion of not being on your own, locked behind a door and teaching, ... there's a lot of security in that and this model [QT Rounds] removes a lot of security and ... teaching in front of your peers is quite challenging. [510002]

Teaching in front of peers was so challenging, and so contrary to conventional practice, that some teachers confessed their early reaction to the idea of QT Rounds:

We were all along thinking, we're not going to teach in front of anybody, we're not going to actually do that, we'll pull out before that or whatever, but [now] we understand what this is all about. [510006]

As one teacher explained, "it really, to me, makes me a better teacher" [513005], but she quickly returned to the pressure of teaching publicly:

but then, it does put pressure on you also. The pressure of, and this is my personality, I get really nervous, like I'm nervous here and now and I go red (laughter) which is normal, but the pressure of having to teach in front of a crowd is hard. [513005]

She then proceeded to add, "but you get through it and the next time you do it, you do it easier and the next time after that, it's not so hard" [513005].

The benefit of observing others was clearly articulated by other teachers. One teacher indicated that she had often wanted to see what other teachers were doing:

Watching other people teach ... that's the way I like to learn and I've said that around here all the time. Someone will say 'oh so and so does a really good literacy blog'. Well let me go and watch it, don't just say they're doing a good literacy blog. I need to see their literacy blog because I'll adopt whatever is good. Whatever you feel is the right way, I'll adopt it happily, I'll have a go. So I think being able to see other people teach was really helpful. [510007]

Another stated how the QT Rounds process essentially put teachers into a process in which there was no hiding place:

I think that it's the best approach to changing your thinking and changing your classroom practice that I've been involved in...this rounds approach means that you're in the thick of it straight away. There's no hiding, there's no – like it's you're in there and you're doing it and it's affecting your classroom practice... like I was going in and viewing other people's lessons and there's so much value in even doing that and learning from each other and it's the value of the conversation afterwards that's so important and sort of that reflective practice. [513004]

This teacher's acknowledgment of the "value of the conversation afterwards" was a recurrent theme, clarifying that it was not just the act of watching or being watched, which many teachers do all the time with other adults in their classrooms, it was the professional conversation that followed the observation that was the powerful part of teaching publicly:

Well it's definitely that other people viewing you and then going back and honestly talking to you about it and the assurance you get from that, but also the positive of seeing other people and thinking oh yeah, look how well they did that, I could do that. Just I think, that model of sharing your teaching practice and then sharing your...what's that word where you break it down and talk about it and...your view on what they did, yeah. [510002]

The experience of teaching publicly was reported positively with reference to other key features of the intervention, including the time available for discussion and analysis, the

overall time dedicated to the Rounds activity, and the fact that an experience which all PLC members shared.

Shared language and concepts for practice

The Quality Teaching model was critical in providing common language and concepts which guided teachers' preparation, observation, reflection, discussion and subsequent refinement and, we argue, contributed to the power of the professional dialogue that followed lesson observations:

I think I was third and I remember sitting there once thinking, oh crush, one instance I think where a score was something completely way off what everyone else had coded and I was like oh gosh, I was doing so well. It was just...but I think what was more valuable was the talk around it and different people's insights into why they coded a particular way, so yeah while, though it was just that one fleeting moment of oh dear I'll just sink into my shell, the conversation allowed me to come back out I guess and then still be a part of all the conversations that came after, still be part of all the sessions that came after. [510003]

This powerful statement from the only early career teacher in the sample is illustrative of the potential of the shared language and concepts for enabling professional dialogue. The expectation that teachers share and discuss their different codings for each element of the QT model, "allowed" her to "come back out" of her shell and "then still be a part of all the conversations that came after." When teachers lack a common framework and professional language, early career teachers are often afraid to 'stick their necks out', instead staying firmly and safely inside their shells where their professional growth can be limited (Flanagan, 2010).

In another example of the power of the framework for engaging teachers in professional dialogue, one teacher stated:

it gives you a way to talk about things with people, I mean teacher X never talked to me about teaching or developing a great lesson but last week she did and she said, "do you think it's got this?" or "how do I bring this element into it?" She has never before talked to me about that and because I knew the language and we both had something that we had in common, we could talk about it and make each other better. So I think that's what you get from going to see other people's lessons and hearing about other people's lessons [510005]

In this example teachers, who had "never" had that kind of conversation with each other previously, were talking about their practice.

It was the language and concepts of Quality Teaching that also re-energised experienced teachers participating in the QT Rounds process:

I've really, really enjoyed the opportunity to be involved with Quality Teaching. First of all in general because I...having taught for 30 years, it was probably...came at a good time when I was starting to feel a little bit stale. I wasn't unhappy with my teaching but Quality Teaching has helped me look at it in the lens, under the QT lens, but make some changes to my teaching and it's given me really good professional development that I wouldn't have had otherwise, so I've really valued it for those reasons. I think it's affirmed a lot of the things that I've always thought but made me look more closely at it and be more specific in what I'm...when I'm planning to do things, look at it much more specifically because I now have language to use around it, which has been helpful.[511003]

As outlined in this next statement from a teacher, and most importantly for this analysis of the impact of the QT Rounds process, it was the act of coding the lessons and then discussing the coding that contributed to teachers' professional learning:

Okay, so the talking...the coding of the lessons, I find extremely valuable in that there are things in other people's lessons that I think, oh that's a way that I could up...I can

see how I can use that in my lesson. Or the talk that comes after the lesson, and the backwards and forwards of people's opinion, that's built confidence in people to be able to talk about learning pedagogy which we haven't had before. We haven't had it. It's something I guess so powerful, to be able to talk about something that makes so much difference. [5100060]

However, as we know from our own previous research, coding and discussing lessons may not be as productive as it has been for these teachers without the collegial relationships that enable this kind of hard professional dialogue to happen.

Collegial relationships

The relationships within the PLCs were critical. All members of PLCs participated in the QT Rounds process which meant they quickly moved beyond just a sense of community and congeniality, to a shared experience of challenge and support that enabled new respect and increased awareness of the vulnerability of each. In this study, the PLCs did not exist prior to the QT Rounds introductory days, although existing relationships were in place to some degree because each PLC was constituted with teachers from a single school. As one teacher explained, feeling comfortable within the group was important:

I think that having the people that are on it, nobody feels threatened in the slightest by each other coming in and that's really good. I don't know if it would be like that if it wasn't this group of people, so it's been a very good group of people to do this with because you feel very comfortable saying anything in front of them, which is good. You don't feel like you're going to be put down or you know, oh god I sound stupid saying that or...yeah, it's good. It's a very collegial little group. [512007]

In part, this sense of a safe space for engaging in the professional dialogue related to the fact that all of the teachers were in it, the QT Rounds process, together. Everyone had their turn including, in three of the four schools, the principal:

the fact that [the principal] has to get in too, I think is a huge thing because she's not telling us to do it and sitting back and saying "you can do it, it's easy"; she's actually suffering with us and that's really good to see.[513006]

Teachers talked about being affirmed by the group feedback which encouraged greater risk-taking in their teaching:

You feel better about yourself and because of that bit of a pat on the back that hasn't been around before and you knew that it was genuine, you're taking more steps and you're stepping off a little bit more and biting off a bit more and taking more risks.[510007]

They also spoke of the way in which the QT Rounds enhanced their perceptions of other teachers:

so we're all up in the open area and we're all watching and it's a geography lesson and this quite experienced teacher was giving this fantastic lesson, so my opinion of that teacher changed on the spot. The kids were extremely engaged but seeing kids that I have in my class in other environments as well, completely blew me away. [512005]

The difference is that you were putting the tools of your trade on show for people to see, code you, that level of trust that you had to enter into for that to happen. And I think, whilst I always had a fairly high regard for Rachel and Monica [pseudonyms used],... I gained an increased respect for Rachel and Monica in watching how they planned and how they executed their trade. [510001]

Quality Teaching Rounds

Our attempts to locate disconfirming/contrary evidence have come up empty so far. The teachers involved in PLCs who are undertaking regular QT rounds are highly satisfied with the experience as one of professional learning. Many have commented that it is some of the most, if not the most, powerful professional learning in which they have engaged. Granted there has been a significant investment of resources in this process and its replication elsewhere would require similar investment. However, a school system or government that genuinely seeks to improve the quality of teaching needs to make such an investment that treats teachers as professionals and honours them with the conditions that enable substantial opportunity for collaboration and learning. Schools that are seeking productive means of meeting their targets as National Partnership schools would do well to consider such an investment locally. Granted also the role of the facilitator has not been discussed in this paper. The qualities we sought in our facilitators may well be critical to the success of the QT Rounds – highly knowledgeable about QT in all its subtleties, experienced in using QT with teachers for analysis and refinement activities, experienced classroom practitioner, respectful of teachers, skilled at people management, sensitive social beings. We will explore the facilitator's influence in a subsequent paper.

The following statements from teachers and principals sum up the experience of QT Rounds:

I think it's been the best PD that we have had because one, it has substance and two, it has ... in-built in this delivery, we have an opportunity to see each other teach and that has brought about an openness to change. An openness to risk taking knowing that it's in a group that are supportive and it's giving us language to be critical or to analyse without it being personal. [510005]

It's more...just taking the time to stand back and reflect on now, not just did it work? Not just did I get to the end and everybody behaved themselves? But did I see from what happened, the opportunity for those kids to learn and express their learning? I think I'm reflecting more on that in everything I do." [510002]

You're working with a group, you're talking the same language and you've been given time to do it and it's over a long time rather than you go somewhere, you have given information, you come back and you're meant to implement it yourself. This way you've got the support for the whole way through. You've got a group of seven people there, you can talk the talk with them, you're given time to do your work. It's scary presenting your lesson of course but once you're still within your group of your seven, you've still got colleagues that will support you and come to you before you plan your lesson and will sit you and go through and help you, even plan your lesson and so that's more encouragement to say oh [teacher x] you've forgotten this or let's add this. [513007]

The change in school culture was described by two of the principals:

Before QT came along, we didn't have people opening up their rooms and allowing other people to come in and watch them teach. Now we've got...people are getting good ideas from watching each other. It's opened up a whole new field that we didn't have before and it's given us a common language to talk about everything. [513002]

They quite openly talk about their teaching, whereas I think that was one of their hidden taboos that no one else spoke about previously and it was just you get in the classroom, close the door and hope for the best. Whereas now they're thinking and talking and listening to each other about how to go about their craft of teaching, so that's a positive and the kids are the winners so that's the main thing.[512001]

Conclusion

In this analysis, we begin to see the potential of QT Rounds to not only tweak teachers' practice, but to more profoundly change what it means to teach. Instead of the privatised practice of working within one's own classroom, these teachers had opened their teaching practice to the professional scrutiny of colleagues. The visits to each other's classrooms are not just about having a look at what another teacher is doing through a lens of self-interested and idiosyncratic curiosity. Visits as part of Quality Teaching Rounds are genuine invitations to provide critique and suggestions for refinement through the shared diagnostic lens of the Quality Teaching model and are characterised by high expectations for the capacity of observing teachers to articulate their insights with specificity, sensitivity, and accountability for the evidence used and judgements made. In short, QT Rounds provide serious opportunities for collegial learning through focused professional dialogue. Such an experience is, as attested to in the interviews, uncommon in teaching.

The lack of a shared knowledge base in teaching has thwarted many attempts at teacher professional learning and school reform. In the PLCs, where there was high commitment to the value of Quality Teaching, the framework provided the means by which teachers were able to shift their personal conceptualisation of teaching and their capacity to engage more fully in professional conversations with their colleagues. We argue that it is the specificity of the Quality Teaching framework's indicators and descriptors that enables this transformation. The volunteer teachers participating in QT Rounds are, in a sense, signed up to a process whereby they are required to not only make their teaching public when it is their turn to have a lesson observed, but also to make their thinking about teaching public. This thinking publicly includes, to some degree, revealing their capacity: to observe carefully; to interpret what they see in the busy, multidimensional, simultaneous environment of classrooms; to judge what they have seen in relation to 18 elements of classroom practice and make decisions about the codes, on the 1-5 scales, which they think best represents what they observed; to then be able to articulate all of this; all of which reveals a great deal about who they are as teachers (their beliefs, their priorities, their weaknesses) and how they teach (their pedagogical approaches, their knowledge, their skills). As the teachers commented in the interviews, rarely have they had such dedicated time to do professional analysis of teaching and, for these teachers, it has not ever been so public, collegial, and critical.

Finally, the collegial relationships fostered by participation in the QT Rounds, which were characterised by openness and trust and risk-taking, enabled relatively quick change: change to teachers' own practice; change in teachers' understanding of teaching; change in teachers' perceptions of their colleagues, and in some cases, perceptions of their students; and change in the form of professional engagement with colleagues. While Tony Bryk (AERA, 2010) recently, and many others before him, have bemoaned the glacial pace of educational change and Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth (2001) have found that teachers need at least 18 months in professional learning communities before they can come to shared understanding and purpose that goes beyond congeniality to 'mature' professional engagement, what we have found so far with QT Rounds, is that teachers have been able to move to new professional relationships characterised by respect, support, and critical analysis in well under a year. Elmore (2007) wrote in relation to his work with the Connecticut Superintendents' Network, "Let's act like professionals." It appears that QT Rounds are enabling teachers to do just that.

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