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Maika Yeigh

*Portland State University, [myeigh@pdx.edu](mailto:myeigh@pdx.edu)*

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## **Using Problems of Practice to Leverage Clinical Learning**

*Maika J. Yeigh,*

*Portland State University*

### **Introduction**

Teacher preparation is a complex endeavor. Preparation programs are designed to transform regular humans into adept teachers through carefully constructed coursework and clinical experiences. University programs and the K-12 school systems both play important roles in the process; however, tensions have persisted between university coursework and clinical field work—a divide between “theoretical” and “clinical”. The 2010 NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel Report issued a call to action, and asked teacher preparation programs to reconceptualize approaches to pre-service teacher learning by placing clinical experiences at the heart of the work in an effort to bridge traditional theoretical and clinical divides (Henning, Erb, Randles, Fults, & Webb, 2016; NCATE, 2010). This article details one teacher preparation program’s attempt to answer the NCATE call to action through the use of instructional rounds during clinical field experiences. In a pilot study, teacher candidates developed problems of practice to investigate through the instructional rounds process. In tandem with bridging the aforementioned divide, the pilot study also sought to leverage clinical experiences to improve and accelerate teacher candidate learning.

### **Pre-Service Teacher Development**

In a meta-analysis of pre-service teacher development, Fuller used a “concerns-based” model to identify three categories as foci of concern commonly held by pre-service teachers (1969). In Fuller’s expansive review, candidates began with an inward view of teaching, with

initial concerns related to “self” as they entered into their clinical experiences. Candidates wondered what their role was in the classroom, their place in the larger school context, and whether they were allowed to make procedural and instructional decisions. In Fuller’s model, as the clinical experience continued, concerns shifted toward “tasks”, with candidates feeling concern toward gaining competency in completing both clinical and programmatic requirements. Toward the end of the practicum experiences, candidates turned their concerns toward “students”, with wonderings that included whether students would benefit from specific instructional strategies and what methods of content delivery would best meet the needs of those students (Fuller, 1969).

More recent scholars have built on Fuller’s work in a few important ways. First, Conway and Clark (2003) reinforced the understanding that candidate’s developmental stages are initially focused on self and then eventually turn their concerns toward students. However, the authors built on the outward-focused model by positing that candidates also experience an inward-focused development as they gain experience in the clinical setting. In a long-term in-depth study of six teacher candidates, the researchers learned that teacher candidates initially voiced concerns about more immediate issues such as classroom management; however, as they gained experience and confidence, candidates’ concerns turned toward issues such as their capacity to grow and improve in their teaching (Conway & Clark, 2003).

Stair, Warner, and Moore (2012) added another layer onto the development of teacher candidates in their study of an agricultural education program. The study followed teacher candidates as they moved from introductory teacher preparation work, into more advanced programmatic and teaching preparation, and then on to the first induction year of teaching. The areas of concern developed similarly to those found in Fuller (1969) and Conway & Clark (2003), growing increasingly more complex as the candidates gained experience. More specifically, the

candidates' initial concerns that were described as concerns about "self", naturally turned into more concern toward "tasks", and then evolved into concerns about "impact" on students and their learning. In addition, candidates voiced additional concerns that the researchers identified as "non-teaching", which included concerns about finances, securing a teaching position, and maintaining outside relationships (Stair, Warner, & Moore, 2012).

It is understood, then, that teacher candidate development begins with a concern for "self". Preparation programs can design course content, practicum experiences, and assignments that move candidates beyond this developmental phase. However, within the time constraints of preparation programs, the conundrum is whether there is a way to accelerate the process in which developing teachers move from a focus on "self" to a focus on "students". The reallocation of emphasis is important: Ensuring that students learn is the central desired outcome of schooling. DuFour reminded educators to focus on student learning as the first principle of Professional Learning Communities and that "the central mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn" (DuFour, 2004, p 1). Preparation programs play a role in developing the mindset that moves focus from *teacher* to a focus on *student learning*.

### **The Role of Professional Learning Communities in Candidate Learning**

In Professional Learning Communities (PLC), this shift is detailed as a purposeful pivot from "teaching" to "learning" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; DuFour, 2004). PLC structures are commonplace in schools as a means to improve teaching and learning and are based on the assumption that student learning improves in tandem with improvements in teacher learning. In 2008, Vescio, Ross, & Adams conducted a meta-analysis of the research measuring the impact of PLCs on teaching practices and student learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). PLCs were commonly used, but the meta-analysis analyzed whether PLCs were indeed improving student

learning. Eleven studies were used in the analysis, all of which supported that PLCs fostered changes in instructional practices. Five studies documented specific information about the types of instructional shifts that occurred, all of which were categorized as a pivot from teacher-centric to student-focused. And, while the meta-analysis also considered other outcomes created by the effective use of PLCs (ie: school culture, teacher learning, collaboration) the analysis about student learning is most relevant for this manuscript. Eight of the studies looked at the connection between effective PLCs and positive teacher learning that led to improvements in student learning; all reported improved student learning outcomes as a result of effective PLCs. The authors write, “Although few in number, the collective results of these studies offer an unequivocal answer to the question about whether the literature supports the assumption that student learning increases when teachers participate in PLCs. The answer is a resounding yes” (Vescio, et al., 2008, p 87). PLCs are one means to maintain education’s focus on students and their learning.

Teacher candidate development away from “self” takes time. The acceleration of teacher candidates’ pivot toward student learning was the impetus for this study. The (Blinded) Teacher Education Program (XXXX) is a year-long licensure plus Master’s Degree program that graduates around 90 teacher candidates at the secondary level each year. The program itself is constructed around constructs of teacher learning identified by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Teacher candidates concentrate on one content-area for their teacher licensure (ie: Language Arts, Social Studies, Mathematics, Health/Physical Education, Science, World Language, Art, or Music) and take three terms of content-area methods coursework. Candidates also have a year-long clinical field placement in a public-school setting. The year-long clinical experience begins during fall quarter with the candidate in their host classroom for approximately 15 hours per week. During winter quarter, teacher candidates undertake more

teaching responsibilities and spend 20 hours per week in their placement. During spring term, candidates assume more complete teaching responsibilities while at their host school full-time and work the same hours as their mentor teacher.

As an additional programmatic support, teacher candidates are assigned into content-diverse cohorts, a model that has shown to contribute to teacher candidate success (Lawrence, 2002; Peterson, Benson, Driscoll, Narode, Sherman, & Tama, 1995). Candidates remain with their peer cohort and a faculty cohort leader for the duration of the program. An additional benefit of the cohort model structure is for teacher candidates to function as a large PLC. Within the larger PLC, candidates create smaller *consultancy groups* (Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2007) to tackle issues that emerge in their learning, specifically around clinical field work. The purpose of a consultancy group is to build and expand thinking, with the idea that using a focused group structure to tackle a dilemma provides for both a rich pool of ideas as well as a community-minded focus on problem-solving. Teacher candidates in XXXX work in consultancy groups during the fall and winter quarters; the dilemmas arise out of their clinical field placement classroom experiences.

Traditional dilemmas for new teacher candidates tend to focus on “self”, as would be expected from the literature on teacher development. Examples of these dilemmas include how the teacher candidate “managed” off-task behaviors and other redirection incidents, relationship challenges with the mentor teacher, and time management for lesson delivery. Although all of these dilemmas are pertinent to the teacher candidate, they are removed from the sphere of student learning.

## **Introducing Instructional Rounds with Teacher Candidates**

To situate the focus of candidate learning toward the clinical experience, the Principal Investigator—a university faculty member—organized a series of Instructional Rounds in local schools. Instructional rounds are similar to medical rounds where interns observe cases together under the guidance of a practicing doctor, the difference being that instructional rounds are conducted in schools and with educators. The rounds model has been an effective tool for increased focus on teaching pedagogy for practicing teachers (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Marzano, 2011). The PI used a modified Instructional Rounds structure in visits to three schools across six months. Participating teacher candidates were all students in an English/Language Arts Methods course. Each visit was co-coordinated with an instructional leader at the school, with classrooms chosen based on teacher interest and availability. Although each school took a slightly different approach to the rounds, all three schools had a “doors-open” policy in place; both teachers and students were comfortable with observations made by individuals and small groups. Additionally, at two of the schools, teachers agreed to meet in a debrief session with teacher candidates after the observations. Teacher candidates visited classrooms in groups of four, observing between four to eight teachers, depending on the school.

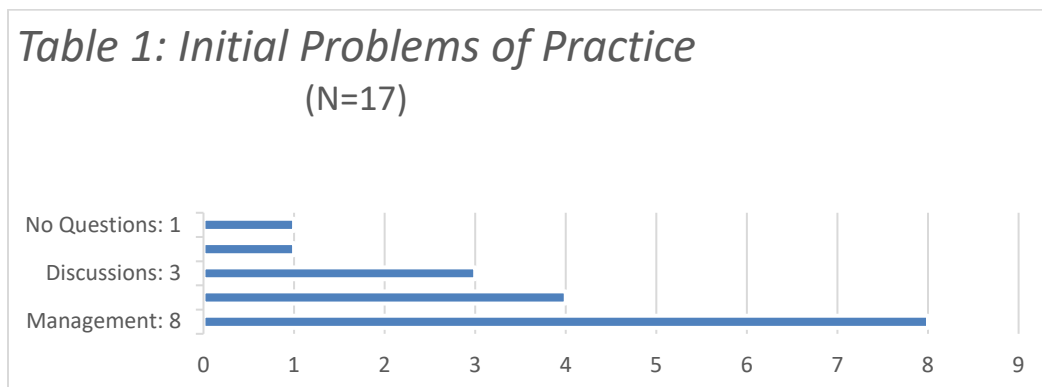
The purpose of Instructional Rounds was to choose one area of focus during observations. Typically, the focus of instructional rounds is on data-based “problems” that can be studied through observation and the collection of evidence. In traditional Instructional Rounds, problems of practice are large-scale school-wide issues that participants study by observing teachers and learners. After the observations are complete, participants use a debriefing protocol to discuss the evidence collected during the rounds. In the Instructional Round structure used for this project, candidates focused on more localized *problems of practice*.

## Adding Problems of Practice to Instructional Rounds

To focus candidates to think about how their instructional moves impact student learning, the PI introduced the concept of *problems of practice* (PoP). The PI used the term *problems of practice* in a modified way from how it is described in the instructional rounds work of City, et al. (2009). Instead of focusing on large-scale and systemic issues to study, teacher candidate problems of practice were more personally located and context dependent. Teacher candidate development provides challenges to deepened thinking: When learning many new skills, it is difficult to parse apart the variety of issues that arise. Finding a problem helps to narrow the focus for teacher candidates. *Problem-finding* is one aspect of understanding the difference between the current situation and the desired result (Lee & Cho, 2007). Once there is a realization of the mismatch between the current status and the goal, plans can be formalized to study the mismatch and create a plan to address it. Starting with the right question is the first step toward increased understanding.

### Initial Problem Formation

The first attempt to create problems of practice came early in fall term after candidates had been in their clinical placements for approximately six weeks or 90 hours. Teacher candidates were directed to consider their teaching at that point and consider what their most pressing questions (ie: problems) were. Seventeen teacher candidates responded; their initial problems of practice can be found in Table 1: Initial Problems of Practice.





The teacher candidate problems of practice fell into four area-of-concern categories: Classroom management, student engagement, discussion facilitation, and differentiation. One teacher candidate could not identify a problem of practice. The questions teacher candidates asked were developmentally aligned with a focus on “self” and the immediate needs of managing classroom behaviors and routines. For example, management questions were worded:

Table 2 Initial Problems of Practice Sample Questions/Issues.	
<b>Sample 1</b>	<i>Three students in one of my classes are extremely disruptive/disrespectful and I have gotten into power struggles with them.</i>
<b>Sample 2</b>	<i>I have trouble confronting disruptive students, especially boys.</i>
<b>Sample 3</b>	<i>I think I need to work on discipline, or how to deal with confrontation with one student in front of other students.</i>
<b>Sample 4</b>	<i>I need to work on waiting until I have complete cooperation before I move on with the lesson, even if it is painful.</i>
<b>Sample 5</b>	<i>How do I get students to ask questions when they are confused instead of doing nothing?</i>
<b>Sample 6</b>	<i>I'm currently thinking about the place of full-class discussions and so far I think it's mostly useful as a technique for me as the teacher, to get a broad idea of what the students think, but that it's not really very useful for the students. Is it?</i>

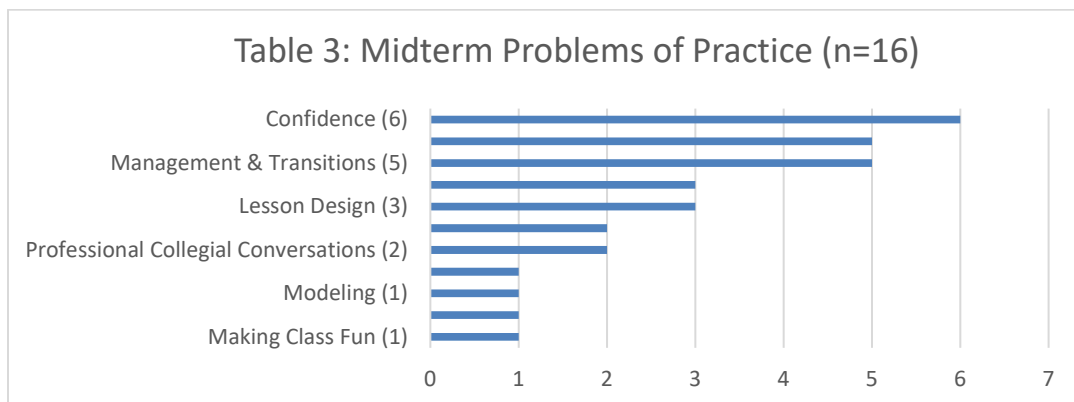
The first Instructional Rounds experience was at a middle school with approximately 1100 students. To support teacher candidate learning development, the first Instructional Rounds structure was designed to break a class period into smaller chunks that could be analyzed. Teacher candidates used an observation protocol that focused on “opening routines” and “closing routines” used by teachers across a variety of content areas. Classroom management problems often happen at the beginning and ending of a secondary-level class period. The focus on these two chunks of the classroom period was constructed in alignment with the problems of practice posed by the candidates. Candidates collected evidence in each observed classroom, debriefed with the PI and instructional coordinator, and then met with the classroom teachers to ask questions. Once teacher

candidates returned to the university campus, they created a plan of implementation using one piece of evidence from the rounds experience.

### Refining Problems of Practice

The second Instructional Rounds experience was at a local high school that served approximately 2400 students. The visit came at the end of fall term, when teacher candidates had spent approximately 13 weeks or 190 hours in their practicum classroom. During those 190 hours, teacher candidates moved from a One-Teach-One-Observe and One-Teach-One-Assist role (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2010) to take more ownership over one classroom period in a stronger co-teaching partnership. As teacher candidates gained more experience in front of students, they had more “material” (ie: problems) to study and relate back to their own teaching. Teacher candidates observed in ELA and Social Studies classrooms, looking for evidence to inform questions based on their own teaching in their clinical experience. At the end of the second Instructional Round experience, teacher candidates were asked to modify their problems of practice based on their own teaching in combination with their new observational data. Candidates worked with their Consultancy Groups to consider three questions: 1) What is successful in my teaching? 2) What can I improve? Be specific and design a problem of practice question. 3) Considering my problem of practice, what can I try in order to make improvements?

*Table 3: Midterm Problems of Practice* shows types of questions teacher candidates asked.



Sixteen teacher candidates participated in the second Instructional Round session. Collectively, those 16 candidates posed 31 questions. The shift from classroom control toward student learning follows the trajectory described by Stair, Warner, and Moore (2012), which can be seen in the questions asked. Table 4: *Sample Questions from Second Instructional Rounds Visit* shows some of the questions.

Table 4 Sample Questions from Second Instructional Rounds Visit	
<b>Sample 1</b>	What happens when I prepare more specific discussion questions? Will it prompt deeper discussions? More student independence?
<b>Sample 2</b>	I want to be able to come up with examples that are relevant and meaningful to my students. Can I prepare for this ahead of time?
<b>Sample 3</b>	How can I give up some class control to students?
<b>Sample 4</b>	I feel rushed when I am helping one student and another student asks for help. How can I stay with one until there is a natural conclusion or understanding?
<b>Sample 5</b>	How do I make my lessons more interesting so students want to participate?

In addition to asking *more* questions, the *sophistication* of the questions changed over time. As teacher candidates gained more experience in their teaching, their questions changed from simple (ie: “Students are unable to manage themselves. How do I get them to stay on task?) to more nuanced (ie: “I want to be able to come up with examples that are relevant and meaningful to my students. Can I prepare for this ahead of time?”) and more focused on student learning (ie: “How can I use higher-level questioning to help students add [textual] evidence to their responses?”) The change in sophistication of questions between the first and the second Instructional Rounds visit fits with what would be expected developmentally for new teachers.

### **Looking for Evidence to Inform the Problems of Practice**

Prior to the third Instructional Rounds school visit, candidates worked again with their Consultancy Groups. This time, candidates added specific details to their problem of practice

questions and brainstormed what evidence they would look for on the classroom walk-throughs that would inform their question. By this time in the practicum experience, teacher candidates had logged approximately 260 hours in their placement classrooms, teaching multiple lessons and their required Teacher Performance Assessment. The additional time and experiences led Consultancy Groups to more effectively diagnose at which point during a classroom observation a candidate could find evidence to inform their question. For example, one candidate initially wondered about how students responded when the teacher used high-level questioning. The candidate's original observation plan was to tally the frequency of the teacher's questions that appeared higher-level and tally student responses. After meeting with the Consultancy Group, the candidate decided to script the starting phrases (ie: sentence stem) of the teacher's questions and then map student responses onto a matrix of Webb's Depth of Knowledge (Webb, 2002). The revised observation plan allowed for the candidate to learn specific language that prompted deeper levels of student thinking to potentially implement in her own classroom discussions.

The third rounds visit was structured specifically around English/Language Arts classrooms at a different middle school. Again, the school population was around 1100 students across grades 6-8. Each group of teacher candidates visited four classes, observing for evidence to support their problem of practice question. Teacher candidates returned to the university classroom to reflect on the third Instructional Round visit and the learning toward their problems of practice.

### **Two Emerging Benefits**

Teacher candidates found benefits to the formulation of a problems of practice, making a plan to study the issue, and then the use Instructional Rounds observations to inform their thinking. Some of the candidates observed strategies in use that did not work that the candidates themselves had thought about trying. Some candidates gained ideas on how to lead discussions focused on

text; they were able to observe students in action and ask the classroom teachers about their decision making in regard to the strategy.

One of the main responses from candidates was around the design itself of the problems of practice. Some candidates reported that they found it helpful to break their issue into smaller chunks to study—even if they did not see it work out successfully in an observation, they felt that with a smaller chunk to work on (ie: preparing questions in advance, or designing sentence stems in preparation for discussions) that alone improved their teaching and increased their feelings of competence and preparedness. What initially looked like an overwhelming issue instead could be broken into smaller pieces to work on systemically. And, the main benefit the teacher candidates reported was to identify how experienced teachers tackle specific instructional issues and how student learners responded.

### **Leveraging Clinical Experiences**

Teacher candidates naturally face a steep learning curve; they are responsible for student learning while doing their own learning on how to design lessons, apply pedagogical understandings, get to know their students, and acclimate to a school and mentor teacher's classroom, among other responsibilities. In addition, teacher candidates face constant evaluation by their mentor teacher, clinical fieldwork supervisors, and other K-12 school personnel. It can be difficult for candidates to parse apart everything they need to learn and practice during such an intense time. In addition, teachers are expected to enter the profession with a modicum of readiness—rarely are there differences in workload and expectations for new teachers than there are for those more experienced educators. Teacher candidates need specific tools that support their focus away from self and toward student learning in order to strengthen their career readiness. This sentiment is echoed by the AACTE 2018 Clinical Practice Commission Report (AACTE, 2018)

which put a focus on PK-12 student learning at the heart of clinical teacher preparation (see page 5), a reminder of the NCATE call to action and a more-than-gentle nudge to teacher preparation programs. To put the clinical experiences at the forefront in an effort to accelerate teacher readiness, though, requires strategically structured opportunities to build candidate learning.

Designing and refining problems of practice is a form of practitioner inquiry. The honing of the problem of practice to dig deeper into the relationships between instructional practices and student learning is a key to improvement. Teacher candidates have an initial stance focused on themselves that matches what we expect with their development; finding ways that accelerate the focus to more outward actions and behaviors that influence students' learning, though, will prepare them for success during their induction years of teaching. New teachers tend to focus on the most visible issues, such as management of time and student behaviors. Fichtman Dana (2013) describes using inquiry to focus on student learning this way:

The target goal for everything one does as a teacher is student learning. However, because the complexity of teaching springs forth many possibilities for exploration for every teacher inquirer, sometimes wonderings aren't directly related to student learning and may instead focus on such things as behavior management and time management (page 19).

While time and behavior management issues directly relate to performance, student learning itself is where we want our teacher candidates' attention to live. Teacher educators want our graduates to feel empowered to tackle the issues that emerge in their classrooms and have the strategies in place to do so successfully.

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**Maika J. Yeigh** is an Assistant Professor at Portland State University where she supports the development of secondary teacher candidates in an initial teacher licensure program. She teaches courses focused on teacher inquiry, humane assessment practices, and K-12 literacy. Her passion and research interests include deepening the connections between field-based clinical experiences and university coursework.