Demonstrating Teaching in a Lab Classroom

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Lab classrooms give teachers opportunities to share effective teaching practices and learn from colleagues.

We've all been to at least one or two costly education workshops that promised to improve our practice but whose format contradicted what we know about how people learn best. Most of us have witnessed occasions when a teacher or group of teachers attend a fantastic workshop and gather armfuls of materials, yet when reality hits the next day, the materials are on the shelf and the teachers are back to the business of teaching. "How was the conference?" someone may ask in the hallway the next day, but there is no structure in place to enable teachers to reflect on and share their new knowledge.

Then there are the "quietly amazing" teachers who go into their classrooms and employ effective learning strategies that go unnoticed by colleagues who could truly benefit from seeing these practices in action. Yet many of these amazing teachers don't perceive their teaching as worthy enough to share with others.

Like our students, teachers need brain-based learning experiences that are relevant and challenging and that provide opportunities for active participation (Sousa, 2006). To be most effective, professional development must be job-embedded—specific to teacher concerns—and presented in nonthreatening ways. Teachers need learning structures that empower them professionally and enable them to collaborate with colleagues.

So how can schools integrate professional learning in ways that will truly improve professional practice? How can we ensure that this model of professional learning is effective and sustainable? The lab classroom project provides the context for teachers to experience in-depth, sustained professional growth within a collaborative learning community.

The Lab Classroom Model: One District's Beginnings

Lapeer Community Schools is a Michigan school district of approximately 6,300 K–12 students. More than 35 percent of students in 6 of the district's 13 schools qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. Each of the seven elementary schools has a learning coach who supports teachers and at-risk students through collaborative teaching, lesson modeling, assessment administration, and intervention services. Principals work primarily as instructional leaders, observing teachers, conducting walk-throughs, conferring with students, and working with teachers during common grade-level planning sessions.
Our first foray into creating a lab classroom began with our desire to provide a level of instructional consistency in our district, particularly in the area of literacy. Teacher knowledge, understanding, and application of the writing workshop model within our district varied significantly. Some teachers had never heard of writing workshops; others were using the model regularly; and staff members at Hadley-Murphy Elementary were studying the work of Lucy Calkins (2003), practicing implementation, and discussing their experiences.

The writing workshop is an instructional delivery model that typically begins with a whole-class minilesson, followed by an extended time in which students and the teacher "do the work of writers." Students delve into independent writing projects while the teacher confers with individuals and small groups. This extended time closes with whole-group sharing time, in which the teacher may ask individuals to share something they are working on that connects to the minilesson at the start of the workshop.

This approach offers many advantages, including the active engagement of students in projects of their own choosing, individualized instruction, and frequent opportunities for formative assessment. Teachers who have taught primarily in a whole-class format may find the approach intimidating, but seeing the workshop in action can help them appreciate its benefits.

One teacher in particular, Karen, stood out as fully embracing writing workshop in her 1st grade classroom, enthusiastically sharing her experiences with her principal and other colleagues. Karen told her colleagues that for the first couple of years of implementing writing workshop, she relied on Lucy Calkins's scripts and videos. "I would just be Lucy in the classroom," she said. Calkins served as a model of the teacher's role in the workshop, giving Karen a starting point from which to begin a new way of teaching.

Thinking about how Karen benefitted from using an expert as a model, we wondered whether the teachers in our district would benefit from following colleagues' examples in a similar way. Although our learning coaches worked with teachers, their practice varied from building to building. Teachers were encouraged to observe their peers, but there wasn't a clear structure in place for learning from their observations. What would such an approach to teacher learning look like? Would it be an effective use of time and resources? After doing some research, we concluded that the lab classroom model might be the best way to encourage teachers to learn from one another.

**What Is a Lab Classroom?**

The lab classroom is an in-house professional development model that takes place in a host teacher's room during the normal school day, framed by a preobservation meeting and a debriefing session. Like surgical theaters where doctors observe actual operations in progress to hone their techniques, the lab classroom provides an authentic opportunity for colleagues to see ideas in practice. Because the model provides for several sessions throughout the year, teachers have the opportunity to share and discuss the successes and challenges of their independent practice with their colleagues, continually improving.
We began our lab classroom program in 2008–09 with a pilot test in two classrooms, one at Hadley-Murphy and another at Mayfield Elementary School, with the intention of expanding the program if it were successful.

**Components for Success**

**A Lab Host**

Host teachers are not expected to be perfect in their practice, but they should be willing to open their classrooms to colleagues and participate in deep discussions of their own practice. Hosting a lab can be stressful, and the host teachers reported a natural level of anxiety at first. But after the initial discomfort dissipated, host teachers grew in self-confidence. Although no teacher should ever feel forced to be a host, those who are "quietly amazing" may need to be invited to consider taking on such a role.

We began our pilot with two teachers who served as hosts. I selected the two teachers, Karen Allmen at Hadley-Murphy and Cynthia Morris at Mayfield, on the basis of classroom observations and grade-level meetings.

**A Facilitator**

An experienced facilitator is crucial to the success of the lab classroom. Facilitators should have skill in working with adult learners and shaping group dynamics to help guest teachers connect their observation and the ensuing dialogue to their own practice. The facilitator organizes the group, plans the schedule, prepares guest teachers, and manages discussions. Before the first scheduled observation, facilitators should become familiar with the host teacher's classroom. They should also consider logistical matters such as where participants should sit or stand during observations and what areas of the classroom they can explore.

I worked as the facilitator at Mayfield, and Gail Vettraino, a special education consultant, volunteered to act as the facilitator at Hadley-Murphy.

**Guest Teachers**

To avoid distracting the host teacher or the students, no more than four guest teachers should visit the lab classroom at one time. Guest teachers should be open-minded and willing to learn, and they should take a nonevaluative stance in the classroom they are observing. In many schools, guest teachers are volunteers who have requested to participate in a lab; however, schools can require lab classroom participation for professional development.

Four teachers participated as guests at each school during our pilot. For the pilot, we sent out an open invitation through the school e-mail system asking interested teachers to participate. This resulted in two groups of teachers from several of our elementary buildings, plus a waiting list of additional teachers. The selected teachers taught at the same grade level or within one year of the grade level of the host; their experience levels ranged from 3 to 30 years.
Administrative Support

Instructional leadership is essential for a lab classroom project to succeed. Administrators need to understand the value of the lab classroom model and be willing to provide the time, location, and staff resources for implementation. The cost of substitute teachers is perhaps the only significant financial expense, making the lab classroom a cost-effective means of providing professional growth. Principals do not generally participate directly in lab classroom observations, but they might visit debriefing meetings.

How Does the Lab Classroom Work?

For our pilot program, the teacher teams met for four full school days during the year. These meetings included the preobservation meeting, the visit to the lab classroom, and a postobservation debriefing.

Before the Observation

For classroom observations to be effective for all participants, the group must have a specific learning focus. During the meeting before the observation, the guest teachers focus on the purpose of the observation by discussing what they are trying to do in their own classrooms. For example, several veteran teachers at our schools revealed that they weren't even sure what a writing workshop should look like. Their initial observation, then, was on the environment and the roles of teacher and students: How was seating arranged? What resources were available? What was on the walls? What was the host teacher saying and doing? What expectations of these roles were evident in the culture of the classroom?

Although host teachers should be outstanding examples of the kinds of teaching we envision, participants need to understand that the term lab implies practice and experimentation, not perfection. To address these concerns, the lab classroom requires explicitly communicated and mutually acceptable norms, which our facilitators shared at the preobservation meeting. Guest teachers were expected to come to the classroom with a willingness to learn and a focus on the purpose of the observation. They were to note any questions, record any observations of interest, and avoid interrupting the instruction.

During the Observation

Depending on the goals, the length of the observation may vary. Sometimes guests will just observe a brief lesson; at other times, they might stay for more than two hours to see the various transitions within an extended literacy block. In either case, the classroom operates as it normally would.

Guest teachers sit or stand, quietly observing and taking notes. They are welcome to sit in close during a teacher-student conference, small-group lesson, or student group discussion, simply listening to and observing the interaction. Although guests are discouraged from initiating conversations with students, they can respond if a student approaches them.
Students in our lab classrooms were rarely distracted by the presence of other adults; the interactive setting of the writing workshop lends itself to movement, discussion, and the comings and goings of other adults besides the teacher. The lab classroom, in fact, can have a positive effect on students' attitudes toward learning. "I like writing now," a 4th grade boy told me, "because you and the other teachers came to watch how we learned."

The Debrief

To fully benefit from the lab classroom as professional development, follow-up is essential for both the observers and the host teachers. The facilitator typically leads a discussion of the observation, prompting questions, ideas, and reflections. The questions may include clarification of activities or conversations observed during the lab classroom. Some facilitators may begin with the prompt, What did you notice? Each guest teacher answers in turn in a whip-around format, and the host teacher may take notes and then clarify misunderstandings or address questions after all guests have shared. Eventually, the debriefing sessions should take on a natural rhythm of their own, and facilitators are less likely to need to redirect discussions or probe for depth.

During the debriefing session, guest teachers may also share the successes and challenges of their own classrooms. At the end of the year, our host teacher said that the professional dialogue had been powerful for her, allowing her to "re-see" her practice and push her thinking.

Some communities use this time to conduct a relevant book study as they plan their year of observations. Our groups studied Katie Wood Ray and Lisa Cleaveland’s (2004) About the Authors: Writing Workshop with Our Youngest Writers. They then spent time setting individual professional goals for their own classrooms and planning for the next lab visits—determining their focus, their reading assignments, and next steps.

Our Next Steps

Our pilot lab classroom project was successful enough for us to modify and expand it for the 2009–10 school year. We realized that we now had a way for teachers to see best practice in action and to discuss practice with peers. Our teachers wanted to see what writing workshop looked like and found the experts right in our district.

Now, to prepare all elementary teachers for implementation of reading workshop, each elementary school is hosting an early and upper elementary lab classroom. Using roving subs, all teachers visit the lab six times throughout the year using a three-hour block of time for the preobservation, observation time, and debriefing. Each session focuses on a particular component of the reading workshop model.

Although implementation of the lab classroom takes time and is initially challenging, if done correctly it can be an effective model for sustained professional learning in any content area. Here in Lapeer, we look forward to seeing how the lab classroom transforms learning for students and teachers.
References

