

IN DEMONSTRATION CLASSROOMS, IT'S SHOW- AND- TELL EVERY DAY

BY KAREN GROSE AND JIM STRACHAN

“So much professional development is all theory, but demonstration classrooms allow us to see the theory in practice, which is critical. As teachers, we rarely get to see other teachers at work. We may talk about teaching, but there’s a real value in seeing it. And the demo classroom is authentic and allows us to witness things that work and things that may not. The chance to have constructive collaboration and debriefing is so valuable.”

— Toronto teacher

“Direct observation of the professional practices of teachers by teachers must become the new foundation of professional development.”

— Reeves, 2008



Three years ago, the Toronto District School Board, the largest in Canada and the fourth-largest in North America, began to explore demonstration classrooms as a way to create a richer model of job-embedded, differentiated, and personalized professional learning. By doing action research and examining a variety of professional learning models from other districts, we chose a research-based model that fits the needs of a system serving students from 175 nationalities and speaking more than 80 languages. With the program in its third year of implementation, the Toronto District School Board hosts more than 380 demonstration classrooms representing every grade level, all subject areas, combined grades, half- and full-day kindergarten, single-gendered learning, targeted programming to support closing the achievement gap for English Language Learners, students taking grade 9 applied mathematics, racially marginalized students, and children with special needs.

The purpose of demonstration classrooms is to support



student achievement by building instructional excellence through the intentional sharing of knowledge and practice. Underlying this vision is a strong belief that all staff and students possess tremendous strengths and attributes.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING A DEMONSTRATION CLASSROOM VISIT

In her article “Power plays: Proven methods of professional learning pack a force” (2005), Lois Brown Easton says that powerful professional learning:

- Arises from and returns benefits to the real world of teaching and learning;
- Focuses on what is happening with learners (both student and adult) in the classroom, school, and district;
- Has collaborative aspects;
- Establishes a culture of quality; and
- Slows the pace of schooling, providing time for the inquiry and reflection that promote learning and application.

Easton’s work combined with Marzano’s instructional rounds research (Marzano, 2009) and Learning Forward’s

Standards for Professional Learning formed the basis of the design of the demonstration classroom learning model. Instead of spending a day discussing effective teaching practice in an environment isolated from the classroom and student learning, small groups of approximately six teachers are:

- Engaged in a guided and focused observation of a colleague who is teaching students in his or her classroom for the morning; and
- Actively participating in a collaborative debriefing session with the instructional guide and the demonstration classroom teacher to ask specific questions and share ideas and plan for the implementation of the observed effective teaching strategies with the support of the guide (coach or instructional leader) in their own classrooms.

For the participating teacher, each demonstration classroom experience includes the following core elements:

- **Orientation:** An opportunity to connect with the coach or instructional leader guiding the visit and share specific learning goals for the day.
- **Observation:** Focused observation and authentic professional learning in the actual classroom, guided by the coach or instructional leader.
- **Debriefing:** An opportunity to reflect on the classroom experience, ask questions, and share ideas with colleagues, the demonstration classroom teacher, and the coach or instructional leader.
- **Action planning:** A structured action planning process for applying the learning to participants’ specific teaching contexts.
- **Follow-up:** Direct assistance from a coach to support the implementation of new ideas and strategies back in their classrooms.

Toronto District School Board

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Number of schools: **558**

Enrollment: **250,000**

Staff: **33,000**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	31%
South Asian:	23%
East Asian:	17%
Black:	12%
Mixed:	7%
Middle Eastern:	5%
Southeast Asian:	4%
Latin American:	2%
Aboriginal:	0.2%

Main language other than English spoken in the home: **47%**

Students born outside of Canada: **26%**

Languages spoken: **80**

Special education: **17%**

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In 2009-11 registration data, we noted that a defining characteristic of demonstration classroom learning is colleagues with a vast range of experience and roles learning alongside each other. More than 45% of participants are beyond their first five years of teaching, speaking to the power of this approach to encourage intentional sharing of knowledge and practice for all educators.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

“I love these demonstration classrooms. For principals, it allows us to see best practice and how programs are implemented in other areas and classrooms beyond our school. I think it’s fantastic for the entire system.”

— Participating principal

All participants in the demonstration classrooms initiative receive an email message six to eight weeks after their session asking them to complete a short online survey about the impact of the demonstration classrooms on teaching practice and student learning. (See example at www.surveymonkey.com/s/TDSBDemo).

The chart below is a summary of responses from 1,752 participating teachers as of June 2011.

WHAT WE’VE LEARNED

Our data to date reveal a very high level of impact of demonstration classroom learning compared to the traditional work-

shop model, and the debriefing and action planning afternoon is slightly more meaningful than actual the classroom observation.

From our online data collection and feedback from focus groups of demonstration teachers, guides, and visiting teachers, we have summarized our lessons learned in these key areas:

- Personalization and authenticity;
- Importance of the guide;
- Learning of the demonstration teachers; and
- Our learning in leading this program.

PERSONALIZATION AND AUTHENTICITY

Demonstration classroom learning represents an approach to professional learning that is personal. Because we have more than 380 demonstration teachers, virtually any teacher can find a match to his or her current teaching assignment. That said, although all the visiting teachers may teach the same grade or subject, it is not uncommon for each of the visiting teachers to reveal different learning goals for the day during the goal-setting conversation with the guide.

One person may be focused on classroom management, another be interested in how the demonstration teacher structures his or her guided reading program, and still another may want to learn more about how the teacher fosters inclusion with the students. Demonstration classroom learning provides a venue for each participant to observe authentic teacher practice and student learning that aligns with his or her unique learning goals.

Even more powerful is what our data tell us about the im-

IMPACT ON TEACHING PRACTICE						
	Not meaningful	Somewhat meaningful	Meaningful	Very meaningful	Response average	% Meaningful + Very
Classroom observation	1%	5%	32%	62%	3.55	94%
Debriefing / Action planning	1%	2%	31%	66%	3.62	97%

IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING						
	Not meaningful	Somewhat meaningful	Meaningful	Very meaningful	Response average	% Meaningful + Very
Classroom observation	2%	10%	38%	50%	3.36	88%
Debriefing / Action planning	2%	9%	37%	52%	3.39	89%

EFFECTIVE TEACHING

The following chart reflects the collated ideas of central staff and demonstration teachers and highlights some of the key elements observable in Toronto District School Board demonstration classrooms.

EFFECTIVE TEACHING IS INCLUSIVE, INSTRUCTIONALLY PRECISE, ATTRIBUTES-BASED, AND LEARNING-FOCUSED.		
Big idea	What the teacher does	What it looks like
Inclusive	Fosters authentic connections with all students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcoming, safe, and caring environment where students feel free to take risks. • A sense of joy in the classroom. • Students feel cared for and valued. • Strong relationships are evident among teachers, students, community, colleagues, parents, and caregivers. • Mutual respect is a defining characteristic of the teacher-student relationship and student-student relationships.
Instructionally precise	Differentiates instructional practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relentless, intentional, high-yield strategies are used to reach all students. • Effective assessment practices for learning (ongoing teacher reflection, frequent monitoring of student progress, adjusting teaching and learning structures and content based on student input and data). • Open-ended learning tasks that require critical thinking are evident. • Flexibility of instructional strategies and structures based on student needs. • Students reflect about their abilities and learning and set goals for improvement. • Teachers collaborate and engage in ongoing, job-embedded professional learning to refine instructional practice.
Attributes-based	Purposefully seeks out of the strengths and attributes of all students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy using practices that reflect the social realities of students. • Focus is on the learner and understanding the learning strengths and needs of each student. • High expectations for all students. • Purposeful student collaboration. • Students make choices about their learning. • Learning is meaningful — connected to the students' real world.
Learning-focused environment	Uses classroom environment as a "second teacher."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anchor charts, student work samples, and other cuing and reinforcing strategies to scaffold and support student learning. • Responsibility for classroom environment and learning is shared between the teacher and students. • Students actively engaged in constructing knowledge and learning from and with each other in addition to the teacher. • Students use each other as resources to support their learning. • Information communications technologies are used as a learning tool to engage, support, extend and deepen learning.

portance of the debriefing and action planning component of the day. The morning observation serves as the raw material. As the afternoon progresses, the focus of the visiting teachers shifts away from what they saw to how they can apply their learning to their own teaching context. Visiting teachers report

implementing ideas from the observation and discussion the very next day with their students.

IMPORTANCE OF THE GUIDE

As part of this process, the demonstration classroom teacher

has a full-time job: to teach. The guide facilitates the entire day, from leading the goal-setting conversation and focusing observations to facilitating the action planning and follow-up support.

Demonstration visits without a guide can have what we call the “orange wallpaper” effect. Participants may like the day, enjoy being in someone else’s classroom, but leave with their next step being to use the same lovely orange wallpaper the demonstration teacher has on his or her bulletin board. In the Toronto District School Board, the guide is a centrally assigned teacher (e.g. instructional leader, coach, or special education consultant) who contributes both a strong knowledge of teaching and learning as well as the ability to facilitate meaningful debriefing and follow-up support for the visiting teachers.

LEARNING OF THE DEMONSTRATION TEACHERS

We asked the following question both online and in focus groups: *What impact did being a demonstration classroom teacher have on your own teaching practice and/or on the learning of your students?*

Of all the discoveries we have made in the past two years, this one is perhaps the most gratifying. While the role of the demonstration teacher is to model and provide learning for others, they report tremendous personal and professional growth as a result of their experiences.

- **Increased reflection on current practice:** “I developed a greater awareness of my personal teaching philosophy, a stronger desire to incorporate more varied learning strategies to reach my students.”
- **Fostered inspirational connections with colleagues:** “I highly valued opportunity to make new connections with other Toronto District School Board teachers and also to work closely with our math coach throughout the school year.”
- **Enhanced instructional practice:** “I take seriously the high-yield strategies in my own practice and, as a result of being a demonstration teacher, I reflected about how I could use them on a daily basis.”
- **Impacted student learning:** “The sharing of effective practices served to improve student learning in my own class-

room not just when visiting teachers came to visit but every other day, too.”

OUR LEARNING IN LEADING THIS PROGRAM

Serving our district in its journey toward a job-embedded, differentiated, and personalized professional learning model has been a rich learning experience. By analyzing the data and reflecting on the feedback from visiting teachers, guides, demonstration classroom teachers, students, principals, vice principals, and school superintendents, the district has collaboratively modified and augmented our demonstration classroom learning model throughout the implementation process.

As we have all experienced the phenomena of the same outstanding teachers holding multiple leadership roles within their schools, we set a maximum of three visits per year to any demonstration classroom with each of the dates selected by the demonstration teacher themselves.

We provide one release day for every demonstration classroom teacher to further his or her own professional learning and growth via orientation sessions, visits to other demonstration classrooms, and individual mentoring and planning of demonstration lessons with guides.

We have been very clear about the attributes and qualities we need to see reflected in the practice of teachers volunteering to be a demonstration classroom teacher. When names of potential demonstration teachers are forwarded to us from across the district, each identified teacher receives a personal visit to ensure they model the key elements outlined in effective teaching descriptors.

We have opened the opportunity for demonstration classroom visitation to all district staff, not just teachers. It is not uncommon for the visiting group of six staff to include a blend of support staff, teachers, principals, and superintendents who are learning from and with each other.

We have created an interactive, web-enabled DVD of video clips from demonstration classrooms to support the ongoing learning of all participants by enabling virtual classroom visits. Topics include assessment for learning, engaging students, gender-informed instruction, and effective use of nonfiction writing. Each clip comes with a viewing guide and direct links to relevant podcasts, webcasts, and resources.

Lastly, we have been inspired by the feedback from students in demonstration classrooms. Many have indicated that seeing teachers visit their classrooms and ask questions about their learning as part of their adult learning process has provided them a heightened awareness of the importance of lifelong learning for everyone.

“The teachers come into our classroom. They sit down, and they watch us learn, and they learn at the same time what we learn. It was a great experience!”

— Grade 10 student

EVOLUTION AND SCOPE OF DEMONSTRATION CLASSROOMS IN TORONTO DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Demonstration classroom teachers	2 (pilot year)	288	384
Classroom visits	12	558	762
Visiting teachers	70	1,956	2,915

By opening our doors to each other, we continue to build this collaborative culture, where inclusion and divergent thinking are embedded, where effective and innovative teaching practices are shared, and where the personal and professional growth of all district staff directly translates into classroom practice and student success.

LOOKING AHEAD

Without fail, 21st-century student outcomes must become the cornerstone of student learning in every classroom. This will be a critical area of emphasis as we move forward as a system with the emerging design of our demonstration classroom program.

We recently opened our online course registration system and saw 14 pages of professional learning choices for teachers. We were gratified to see that 85% of these opportunities were fully booked demonstration classroom opportunities. We have ample evidence that authentic and personalized professional learning is flourishing within our district.

As we continue to expand this initiative, our goal is that

this intentional sharing of knowledge and practice transcends demonstration classrooms and occurs on a daily basis for every educator at every school and every learning site.

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If you wanted to spend your days tied to a desk, you would have become an accountant instead of a school administrator.

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I made the decision to do all teacher appraisals and walk-throughs, (110+), myself this past year. Thanks to the training I received from TBC, I was able to spend many hours in classrooms and in productive coaching conversations every week. Our school received state recognition for programs implemented as a direct result of my coaching from the classroom level, rather than from behind my desk.

- Lisa Kersh, Principal, Plainview High School, Plainview, TX

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