WRESTLING
WITH DATA

Learning network grapples with how to gather and analyze valuable information

By Harriette Thurber Rasmussen

As facilitator, I noted some trepidation in the room as the eight secondary principals from Eugene (Ore.) School District 4J quietly discussed questions that surfaced through their hopes and fears exercise. Could the practice of visiting classrooms together help them to better lead instruction in their buildings? Would this process stir up controversy with the teachers union?

How did they feel about including teachers in a practice they did not yet understand? Could the time they spend together affect student learning, helping to close a nagging and persistent achievement gap? In a district with a strong, sometimes challenging union presence and a history of highly prized independent practice, there were significant implications to the decision at hand: Should they implement instructional rounds, and, if so, why?

That was three years ago, and, although there was an inkling of the decision they were making through their reading of *Instructional Rounds* (City, Elmore, Fiarman,

& Teitel, 2009), that meeting launched a collaborative investigation into the nature of learning with data as a powerful ally. As the Learning About Learning Network, eight principals, eight teachers, and two central office representatives met every few months to painstakingly gather data about the instructional core — the relationship of student and teacher in the presence of content. Their goal? To analyze and understand the learning process in a way that would increase their capacity to lead instructional improvement. Did they reach it? I'm not sure we have that answer yet, but network members say what they learned transformed their practice. It turned their notion of data and how to use it upside down and has begun to shift a privatized culture into one that values collaborative practice. Even their time together as a network has transformed as they have pushed themselves toward more accountable practice.

Harriette Thurber Rasmussen

THE EARLY DAYS

Implementing instructional rounds was not easy, particularly with a mixed group of principals and teachers who had never worked together collaboratively. The group was off to a rocky start when I asked them to grade a sample video lesson in an attempt to reach several outcomes — none of which were realized. "You set us back," Monroe Middle School Principal Peter Tromba said as we debriefed the experience. "You can't ask us to be nonjudgmental and then have us evaluate what we just saw." We were careful for the next several meetings to avoid any semblance of conclusion as we learned to collect and analyze data. Our collaboratively developed norms were prominently displayed on table tents, and we ended each day reflecting whether we used the norms, whether they enabled the learning environment we needed, and what else might be required. Overkill? Maybe, but it seemed like we all walked on eggshells in fear that our time together would be mistaken as evaluation. "You can't use the word 'observation,'" admonished one network member. I learned to change my language and respect the institutional knowledge in the room. They knew the culture far better than I.

WHAT DATA?

One of the failed outcomes of that first practice video

had been to try to turn their focus from teacher to student. Our mission was to learn about learning and, with one-half of network members responsible for evaluating the other half, it seemed smart to concentrate on the student as the primary data source. In time, they understood that students represent the most critical source of data about learning. Although I wanted them to learn to draw a causal link between the learning they saw and the teaching that caused it to happen, they discovered quickly that it was far more difficult to identify learning than to flag instructional moves. Even learning to look at the student instead of the teacher took some practice: *Look down, not up! What is the student actually doing? What is the task? No, not the assignment, but what is he or she actually writing down? Yes, do look over their shoulders. Yes, do talk to the students. How else will you know?* It also challenged a number of their assumptions about teaching and learning. One principal returned from a classroom visibly upset, declaring, "The teacher is doing everything right, but the kids aren't engaged!" It didn't take many examples like this for them to realize that the student was perhaps their most valuable data source.

Along with learning what data to gather and how to describe what they saw and heard without judgment, network members had to learn how specific the data needed to be. Was it enough to say that students were working in groups? Did they need to describe what students were actually doing in groups? Did they need to script what students were saying to each other? As facilitator, my job was to give them the space to figure it out, with enough structure to give validity to the process. And how they hated that process!

THE DREADED STICKIES

Virginia Seefeld generally sat with her arms crossed in a stance that suggested defiance but, in reality, was just plain dread. As a high school math teacher, Seefeld was

Eugene School District 4J
Eugene, Ore.

Number of schools: **32**
Enrollment: **16,100**
Staff: **755**
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	**70.1%**
Black:	**2.1%**
Hispanic:	**12.8%**
Asian/Pacific Islander:	**4.2%**
Native American:	**1.7%**
Other:	**9.1%**

Limited English proficient: **2%**
Languages spoken: **10**
Free/reduced lunch: **42%**
Special education: **14.2%**
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comfortable with data, but she found the affinity task, which involved sorting and classifying sticky notes, each with a piece of data about learning, to be particularly agitating. She was not alone. Everyone found the sorting process to be difficult, and even more so the labeling of the categories that emerged. This grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to data analysis seemed to stump them no end, regardless of how I structured the task. I fiddled with different prompts, directions, and sorting frameworks to make it less of a struggle, but it was just plain hard. The data on the stickies intended to surface patterns across the classrooms visited, but the route to the conclusions reached was not at all linear. They stayed with it, though, trying to make sense of what they saw that could both deepen their collective understanding about the learning process and inform their practice as leaders of learning.

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OWNING THE WORK

That was three years ago. The network is still together, although their meetings look very different as they work with increasing focus and sophistication to collect and use data. They have adapted the structure and protocols to suit a tighter purpose: peer accountability for making something happen as a result of the data. The desire to have an accountable feedback loop has led them to add a second visit to each school later in the year to see what progress has been made as a result of the learning from the first visit. They also decided on a common network learning focus across the year to facilitate and deepen their learning stance. They have become a team that now guides secondary learning development across their schools.

A CULTURE IN TRANSITION

For a district so intentionally decentralized, developing a common language about teaching and learning, not to mention common practice, is significant. Five years ago, none of the district leadership thought this possible, if even desirable. But the network's practices seem to be shifting that culture. Before each visit, network schools pair up to develop a common focal point for their study of engagement and craft research questions that will be of value to both buildings. Network members visit two schools during each meeting, and, while the initial intent was to foster a tighter system of peer accountability, it has resulted in cross-building collaboration and strengthens members' understanding of the learning focus as they collect and analyze data in two different buildings.

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> **SAMPLE HEADLINES** FROM STUDENT INTERVIEW DATA
> - Curiosity is heightened by newness and application to real-world or new settings.
> - Student engagement is a balance of intellectual struggle and understanding.
> - Motivation plays a role in student engagement.

as observers of the learning process. Network members still write what they notice about the instructional core and the task at hand, but most of their time in classrooms is spent scripting student responses to four questions derived from the research focus and current theory of engagement.

EVOLVING THEORIES

Planning for each visit by the host schools now includes analysis of their prevailing theory of engagement. The use of theory to explicitly guide data collection is new this year, and these theories have evolved over time, as have the questions that orient each visit. During one visit, network members explored the relationship among student engagement, learning targets, and task, with a theory that student engagement is present if students can explain what they are doing and how it moves their learning toward a meaningful target. Interview questions for students followed the story line of their hypothesis:
1. What are you working on?
2. What is the learning target for this lesson?
3. How is what you're doing/working on helping you to reach your learning target or goal?
4. Why is this target important?

Several months later, they investigated the relationship of engagement to personalization, theorizing that if student learning is personalized in some way (through differentiation, knowledge of students, relevance, or choice), then students will be more engaged. The two host schools developed questions designed to understand how students felt the topic or task was meaningful to them and why.

THE DEBRIEF

The day before our first meeting this year, network members asked me to develop a debriefing protocol that could be completed in an hour. I laughed. Our data analyses generally took at least three hours, and, even then, we never seemed to be quite finished. But the network's desire to visit two schools in a day necessitated adaptive facilitation, so I designed a rapid data transfer system. I also approached that first debrief with some trepidation. To my surprise, however, they completed the data transfer and analysis within 40 minutes and launched into group discussion of the headlines I had asked them to surface from the student interview data. As the year went on, I no-

ticed that the way they worked with data became more learner-centered and personality-driven. Some members would jump to conclusions and then poke into the data to see if they could justify what they thought they were seeing. Others spent more time reading the data before forming conclusions, sparking rich conversation and debate while keeping each other in the data with little prompting from me: What do our observational data and analysis tell us about engagement? How do they prove or disprove our current theory? Is there a relationship between the level of task complexity and engagement?

CHANGING PRACTICE

Some of the most powerful stories are the personal ones, shared by individuals whose experience in the Learning About Learning Network has changed how they think about data and its role in their leadership. B.J. Blake, Spencer Butte Middle School principal, now visits classrooms daily to interview students about their learning experiences and script their responses. She emails them, without comment, to the teacher. Her experience with analysis through the network has led her to understand that raw data is far more compelling feedback than advice. Other principals have also found that sharing raw classroom data has sparked authentic exploration by teachers into their practice.

Network teachers, too, describe changes in their practice and the leadership roles they've taken on in their buildings. Cecelia Brands reports common vocabulary and expectations that bridge math and science classes in her building. She is leading the creation of lesson study groups within the math department that will focus on student engagement and learning. In many ways, teachers have been the most visible and vocal proponents of the network through the actions they've taken. Where principals often need time to consider how the conclusions they've drawn can and should impact their practice, teachers immediately find use for the wisdom they mine from other classrooms and, particularly, the power of student voice in their classrooms as they reconsider the learning experience through their students' eyes.

TEACHERS AS COLLEAGUES

In fall 2011, network members met with the school board to discuss their work and how it has changed their practice. In telling a story that illustrated their evolution from doing the work, to *owning* the work, to *bearing responsibility for all students*, they discussed how they believed the district's investment in the Learning About Learning Networks (now numbering seven) has impacted practice and student learning. Much of the conversation revolved around the wisdom of including teachers, with a nod to the resource and political implications. Laurie Moses, the district's director of secondary education whose vision prompted that first meeting of principals, spoke adamantly about their decision to involve teachers: "Adding teachers has

helped keep us to the learning aspect of this work. They've been absolutely essential to our ability to focus. I cannot imagine doing this without them."

Others agree. When they learned that several of the district's newer networks do not yet include teachers, network members were astonished. "Having teachers there was profound because we found that principals would see things one way and teachers would see things another way," Blake said. "To have that perspective really changed my perspective in what goes on in a classroom."

PEER ACCOUNTABILITY

One of the network's goals this year was to promote stronger accountability for action, but the process is in its infancy. They struggle with a lack of time in the shortened debriefs and are experimenting with follow-up visits to the host school by a principal and teacher team. Their thinking is that by the next network meeting, the previous host will be ready to report on next steps that are planned as a direct result of the data and collegial debriefs. It will be interesting to see how this process evolves. As of this writing, the second set of visits, intended to measure progress from the baseline data drawn in the fall, have not begun. My experience suggests that the process will not be as linear as they imagine and that the exact structure for accountability will emerge, as have their collective and individual practices. I do believe it will be different.

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What I expect to remain consistent, though, is the curiosity and level of conversation about the learning process that is very evolved from the fledgling instructional rounds networks I facilitate. This network's sophistication has come from years of rigorous work between principals and teachers and from a real struggle with ambiguity made possible through the trust they've found in each other as colleagues.

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