Learning and Teaching the Disciplines through Clinical Rounds (The Rounds Project)
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Learning and Teaching the Disciplines through Clinical Rounds (The Rounds Project) is a School of Education (SOE) innovation that has (1) integrated literacy teaching and learning into history/social science instruction, (2) deepened prospective teachers’ knowledge of disciplinary literacy teaching and assessment practices, and (3) reduced the fragmentation preservice teachers typically face in a professional program situated in multiple sites (LSA, SOE and K-12 schools). Started five years ago as a collaboration between Bain and Moje and conceptualized as one strand of the SOE Teacher Education Initiative, the Rounds Project now includes a system of assessment and curriculum coordination involving five SOE courses, one LSA course, three cohorts of preservice teachers, ten practicing teachers, seven area high schools, and seven graduate student instructors. Emerging from our individual research, work in schools with teachers across the country, and experiences in teacher education, the Rounds Project has successfully reduced the fragmentation prospective teachers experience, a significant issue in many TE programs around the country. In developing these innovative structural and curricular connections across courses, semesters, and sites of learning, the Rounds Project has built coherence into preservice teachers’ professional program and has drawn local and national attention.

The instructional problem our innovation addresses is the fragmentation that defines most teacher education in the United States. Typically, university teacher education is non-systemic system where prospective teachers learn their content in one place (LSA courses), pedagogy in another (SOE courses), and learn to apply these in a third (the K-12 classroom). Although individual course experiences are outstanding, typically there is too little coordination across these three sites (and too often, little within each). Thus, those who are least prepared to build coherence and develop programmatic meaning – the preservice teachers – are charged with the task of making connections between their work in their LSA courses, professional courses, and in the field.

The Rounds Project began as an attempt to integrate literacy teaching and learning into subject area (i.e., mathematics, social studies, science, and English language arts) and to sharpen preservice teachers’ (PST) understanding of and capacity to help struggling readers and writers become successful readers and writers of the complex texts they must read to access, synthesize, evaluate, and apply subject matter concepts. However, what seemed like a modest reform at the outset required restructuring of our secondary program entailing five innovative reforms: (1) developing of assessments to document PST learning; (2) cohorting students in SOE courses by disciplinary major; (3) establishing spiraling curricular coherence across two core courses and field sites; (4) developing instructional capacity by creating a faculty-led GSI study group; and (5) introducing and managing a new system of field work we call “rounds.” We offer a brief description of each of these below.

Assessment System: To document learning over time, we developed a system to assess the growth of PST learning over the three semesters in the secondary TE program. Grounded in research on teaching and learning in the disciplines, the assessment tools we created included an attitudinal and dispositions inventory, performance assessments, videos of PSTs teaching, and a series of in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of our PSTs. These assessments allowed us to “see” PSTs’ understandings of disciplinary literacy instruction and to assess them on core practices of planning for instruction, analyzing instructional texts, and assessing student learning. In short, the assessment allowed us to develop markers of preservice and beginning teacher knowledge and skill. Our analysis of our students’ performance data helped identify areas where we might improve instruction in individual courses and across the program.

Disciplinary Cohorting: The teaching of “disciplinary literacy processes and practices” is embedded in the teaching of disciplinary teaching methods via subject-matter literacy course, ED402. Prior to this project, UM required all content majors (i.e., history, social science, science, math, English, phys. Ed, music) to take the same literacy course. We reformed this structure to enable students to take a course specifically focused on literacy instruction in their disciplines. This allowed for a deeper disciplinary subject matter and literacy theory, research, and practices even as it enabled a tighter connection with second semester instruction, LSA, and the field experience.
Curricular Coherence around Learning in the Disciplines: We focused our efforts on increasing the curricular coherence across courses and semesters, and between the university and the field. The centerpiece of this work involved developing explicit connections between two core courses in the professional program: ED402: Literacy in Content Area (History/Social Science cohort), a first semester course, and ED432: Teaching and Learning in Secondary History/Social Science, a second semester course. Both courses were tied to field work, with PSTs in secondary classrooms for six hours per week for 13 weeks each semester. There was, at best, tacit coordination among university courses while the sheer number of field classrooms and teachers made university and field coordination exceedingly difficult. Even when faculty designed curriculum to spiral across semesters, PSTs often didn’t see the connections. To remedy this, we shared the central concepts and assignments of our respective courses, using them to forward and backward map the work. Further, we explicitly referenced each other’s assignments so the students might see connections across semesters. We attended each other’s courses to enable us to understand and refer to what our students had or would learn. Such collaboration was instrumental in developing a spiraling set of experiences for our students that would foreshadow subsequent concepts while making it more likely that students would use and extend discipline-specific approaches across their learning experiences and into the field. Further, we redeveloped course assignments, re-purposed readings, and even combined CTools sites. Working across semesters and working with the data from the assessments enabled us to construct coherent through-lines to develop PSTs’ skill in designing and enacting instruction.

Work with GSIs: As our instructional work is situated within the larger program of professional, we attend equally to the education of future teacher educators and education researchers (our graduate students), classroom teachers, and public school administrators. Thus we expanded the focus of our innovation well beyond undergraduate students to include work with GSIs and cooperating teachers in area schools. To develop SOE’s capacity to sustain such work across semesters, courses, and sites of learning, we organized weekly meetings with instructors (GSIs, lecturers and clinical faculty) who teach in five different courses (literacy, methods, field courses) across the three semesters in the program. These meetings enable all to consider and understand programmatic trajectory, sequence and progressions while collaboratively working on curriculum and problems of professional practice. These experiences also prepare GSIs to do the work of teacher education and model faculty collaboration.

Making the Field a site for Rounds: Developing strong, ongoing relationships with practicing teachers and with area schools is a challenge for Schools of Education across the country. Simply finding field placements often takes precedence over the quality of the placement. Consequently, two years ago we began to experiment with “teaching rounds,” modeled on the medical rounds of physicians in training. Groups of PSTs rotate across three to four field sites, working with veteran teachers who have been carefully selected to model particular aspects of the practice of teaching. PSTs then complete assignments as “modules,” with the modules focused on key features of teaching: (a) selecting and using texts of instruction, (b) planning for instruction, (c) assessing and learning from students, and (d) developing student writing, and in the second semester rounds, integrating these components around (e) teaching concepts using multiple texts and (f) assessment secondary students learning. We select the sites for the teaching rounds with attention to what PSTs can learn about the social, cultural, and developmental dimensions of educating adolescents. PSTs move across public and independent urban, exurban, suburban school settings, work with English language learners in subject-matter courses, and cross middle and high school levels. Thus, the rounds experiment places preservice teachers in five different classrooms in five different school settings over two semesters. Thus, the Round Project enables us to focus on both context-specific features of quality instruction and those that cross socio-economic contexts.

In sum, the primary outcomes of this innovation in history/social sciences have been extensive, and we continue to find new avenues for innovation related (such as expanding ties with LSA and developing laboratory schools in Detroit and other southeastern Michigan sites). These outcomes are documented by accompanying materials, which are (1) letters from our dean and two constituencies served by our innovations: PSTs, GSIs; (2) copies of assignments in two courses and samples of student work; and (c) a list of media documentationS of our work.