Overview – The Learning Sprints Process

https://vimeo.com/258881268

Learning Sprint is a powerful and simple process to help educator teams continually improve their practice. There's only really two parts of a Learning Sprint. The first is about team learning, then that moves into running a sprint in your classroom.

Let's have a think about the team learning time. Many of us have allocated professional learning or collaboration time where we come together with colleagues, and during team learning you'll use our tools to support more effective discussions, better engagement with research, and the sharing of your best ideas about how to improve student learning. But there's not much use as educators trying to get better by just talking about practice. We've also got try to do something, and that leads us into the Sprint.

The Sprint is where we take some of the discussions and the things we've decided together during our team learning time, and then define something that's very specific to go and take back into our classrooms and to try out to see whether we can cause learning for our students in a particular area. Learning Sprints are about team learning followed by deliberate action in the Sprint. As we move through cycles of team learning and taking action, bit by bit individually and as a team, we continually improve our professional practice.

Phase 1: Prepare

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We get better as educators by working as teams, having time to discuss practice, engage with research, share our best approaches and unpack what's working and what's not working. That's why it's so important that many, many schools and systems have started to allocate for us time to get together as teams. Not just to do the planning, not just to do the review, but to actually do the time together to learn together.

During team learning in the Learning Sprint, you’ll be coming together and using some of the set tools we’ve got to help structure the conversations that you might want to have as a team. Some of the conversations might be about analysing patterns of student learning or reviewing curriculum and trying to really identify what are the most important areas to learn.

At other times, the discussion as teams might be about trying to analyse why certain students aren't yet making the levels of progress. Perhaps engaging with research, or sharing our best ideas about how to support these students make progress in our school.

The best discussions about coming together, being engaged with both the evidence about student learning in our classrooms, whether that's student data, or other information that you're collecting from student samples and your own professional judgement, but also being informed by the best available research evidence about what seems to have caused learning in the past in other places.
And bring those things together in lively discussions so that we share our perspective and we’re engaged and challenged with the perspective from outside.

The best types of team learning discussions give us a chance to share our theories around how to really support students learn, hear from our colleagues and perhaps certain members of the leadership team about what they see as the best ways to create learning progress, and then also to be engaged by the research - what are the best approaches that are emerging in the research. As we come together as teams, we can bring these perspectives, what you think, what they think and what the research thinks, together to start to formulate better ways forward for creating impact in the classroom.

Have a go with the tools, engage deeply in the top of conversation that shifts how we each think and how we might act as we move from team learning into the Sprint.

**Phase 2: Sprint + Phase 3: Review**

[https://vimeo.com/258881413](https://vimeo.com/258881413)

We don't get better at teaching by just talking about teaching, or engaging with research, or looking at data. We get better at teaching by actually trying to cause learner progress in the classroom with our students. After we have a team learning session, we've had meaningful dialogue, we've done some new analysis, we've shared practice, we've engaged with research. We need to decide together to take some action, and that’s what we call running a Sprint.

Now given that we're all overloaded and overburdened, it wouldn't be appropriate to end the team learning session and to say, "Okay, go and do some big change over the next few weeks and come back." In our approach, we say, "Just run a Sprint." Don’t try to make a huge change. Don’t try to run a marathon. Just do a small specific shift that’s come out of the thinking and work you've done together as a team, and make one small little change in practice and to see what impact that has on student learning.

As you start to get ready to move from the team learning discussion time, ready to go back and start to run a Sprint, think about how you might define a Sprint, getting really precise about what outcomes you want to improve for learners, what practice you might change and what evidence of impact you might be able to collect in the course of this Sprint. Then you go out and you do that Sprint. Go and make those small changes to practice. Go and try at those new research informed strategies and collect some evidence about whether or not it’s working.

Then finally, when you come back later on for your next team learning time, you'll review the Sprint. You'll start to talk about, "Hey, what progress are we seeing for learners? What did we learn by trying these new approaches out, and what shall we do next?" See, Learning Sprints are about taking sharp deliberate action in a very small manageable area. Defining something, doing it and reviewing it. By going through those cycles of deliberately trying to take action and checking whether or not we are having the impact, that’s how we as educators learn to get better at creating impact for our students.
Learning Sprints Pathways

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To really maximise the benefit of our Learning Sprints work, it's worth thinking about how you're actually going to bring them together to bring a coherent pathway of learning. So rather than just doing some team learning, running a Sprint, doing some team learning, running a Sprint, and working on different things and having different conversations, it's worthwhile as a team or even as a whole school to think about whether or not you might actually want to have a common direction for a series of Learning Sprints over a couple of terms or even the whole year.

To do this, first up it's going to be important to set a focus of what area of student learning need do you want to focus on. To set a focus, let's not start with what necessarily we want to do, let's focus on what our students need us to learn next. For some schools, they might focus on an area such as literacy, or numeracy, essay writing, a core area of learning that they want to improve. For others, they might be looking at areas such as student behaviour or self-regulation or social emotional skills.

We're talking about a broad area that might set a focus for work over multiple terms. And at this stage, it's also worth asking, "What research could inform our practice," rather than just heading off to Sprints and then saying, "Hey, we don't have any research to help us." Early on in setting up a pathway, it's good to have that focus, and then try to bring together what research or what evidence-based resources could we turn to, to support our Sprint work. Then we can move through a series of Sprints, getting together doing some team learning, going and taking some deliberate action in the Sprint, reviewing it, coming back for some more team learning. But all these are adding up in cycles of professional engagement and learning around that core area.

The great thing about going on a Learning Sprints pathway is that our Sprints work adds up, and bit by bit we get massive incremental change through the way that we understand that area because of our team learning and what we're actually able to do in the classroom because of our Sprints; small, little changes each and every Sprint, which over multiple terms adds up to a really big shift in our expertise and our collective efficacy as a team.

Implementing Learning Sprints

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So how do we implement Learning Sprints within the busy life of a school? Well, in our work across our community, we've realised that most schools work through four phases of implementation. We call it the 4E framework. From exploring to experimenting, expanding, and then embedding. And the key with good implementation is to not rush through the phases. To be okay with doing the key actions within each of these four phases, and not moving into the next phase until you as a team have really made the key decision. Moving from explore to experiment, from experiment to expand, and then expand to embed.

During the explore phase, school teams are just playing with the Learning Sprints approach. The key goal here is to learn the process, and then to consider whether or not it's actually going to have real relevance and benefit in your school context. So don’t rush the exploration phase. Be playful with
going online and having a look at the tools that are available. Maybe try some of those tools, for just these early teams that are starting to look at whether or not Sprints might be relevant for your context. You might also want to go online and read some of the stories about other schools that have been using Learning Sprints. And consider together whether or not their context is relevant to the sorts of challenges that you’re facing.

You see, the exploration phase is about reducing the pressure. You don’t have to do this. We’re just exploring and playing with the work. And we’re trying to get an answer to two key questions. One of them is, is this actually going to be relevant to the work we’re already trying to do? And the second is, can we bring on a small group of teachers, or even just one team to move into experimentation? They’re the only two things you need to work out in the exploration phase. Is it relevant and how do we connect it to the work we’re already doing? Would some people be willing to have a go at it?

During the experiment phase, the goal is to run some prototype Learning Sprints with just some teachers, or one or two teams, to learn about the process and to learn how to make it work in your context. Too often we rush into implementation and try to get everyone on board from the beginning. We can spend all our time trying to explain what we’re trying to do, convince the sceptics and the cynics, but actually at this stage, we don’t even know exactly what we’re trying to do and how it’s going to come together.

So during the experiment phase, we reduce the pressure. And we work just with some teachers, or one or two teams, to prototype. To play with this approach in the real world context of your school. So during the experiment phase, which can last for a few weeks all the way through to a couple of months, you could do experiments like just asking one teacher to run a short sprint over one week, potentially focusing on something he or she was already trying to work on. You might be able to find one or two teams that are open to this work. Perhaps they are already doing work that looks very similar, even though they’re not calling it Learning Sprints. And you could share the videos, share the tools, and ask them to have a go. Not on a long Sprint taking one to four weeks, but a short. Lean Sprint. Just a few days or one or two weeks. Trying to make it small and manageable.

The goal during the experiment phase isn’t to get it all right. Sometimes we say that the first Sprint you try to run is like the first pancake. It never turns out the way you want it to. But that’s just the way it’s meant to be. It’s taking a playful and experimental attitude to try it out, learn what’s working, learn what’s not working, and consider together whether or not this is really got relevance for your context. At the end of the experiment phase, your core goal is to have run at least one successful sprint with at least one team. That’s it. But it’s crucial to get this proof point of it actually working in your school before we start to move to expand it to others.

So during the expand phase, we’re trying to move from that small pocket, a few teachers or a teacher team who was successful in running a few experimental sprints, towards now more teams and more teachers, making Learning Sprints a typical part of their professional learning and collaboration. So to do this, we need to make sure that leadership first and foremost starts to communicate the agenda, whilst during the experiment phase we often kept it quiet. We didn’t try to announce a big change to anyone, but rather got working with a few people who were willing to try it out. Now it’s time for school leadership to start to explain that we’re going to try out Learning Sprints. This is what it is, and this is the benefit we’re hoping to get out of it. So it’s really important for leadership to set that agenda, and to communicate with clarity about what we’re doing, and why we’re trying to do it.
Secondly, we need to allocate time. Whilst during the experiment phase, it's about hacking together and finding and reallocating a little bit of time to make it work. During the expand phase, we actually need to be willing to think about the agenda of teacher collaboration and professional learning that we have. And reallocate some of that time for the Learning Sprints work. We can't expect people just to be motivated to do Learning Sprints in and around the other demands and commitments they already have. If we want it to happen, we need to allocate the time for it to occur.

Thirdly, we need to start to build the capacity of more teachers and more leaders to really understand the process. This can be done easily by using the online videos and courses. You might also want to reallocate some of the time for professional learning to let people engage with the tools, engage with the videos, and build some confidence about the actual process. And for the leaders of teams, how to actually lead other teachers through Learning Sprints.

During this time the senior leadership team needs to be really tuned in and asking for feedback about what's working for whom and under what conditions. We should be listening up to on which teams it's really starting to get some traction and movement, and we try to accelerate that further, but also being open to some teachers or some teams getting stuck in the work. And without judgement, getting around those teams and trying to provide the support and the capacity they need to be successful.

The expand phase doesn't need to be rushed. It's not about mandating from above, everyone's going to do Learning Sprints, but rather trying to activate a movement by allocating the time, building capacity, and spreading the stories that Learning Sprints is already working. One of the things that can be really energising at this stage is to let teams or teachers start to share what they're doing, and the impact they're starting to have on student learning. This can really accelerate their openness for other people to have a go at their Learning Sprints. At the end of the expand phase, you should be clear that, yes, we're starting to get some real impact from this work, and we're now willing to move towards this becoming embedded within our school.

So the embed phase of the 4E Learning Sprints implementation journey is all about embedding Learning Sprints as an organisational routine. So often there are things that come into our school, we try them for a while, they even spread a little bit. But too often, they dissipate over time. And we can think back at times where I remember when we did that. So if we don't want Learning Sprints to just dissipate over time, then the embed phase helps us to integrate Learning Sprints, something that's going to become the new normal around teacher collaboration and professional growth.

So during this phase, it's going to be important for us to consider, how does Learning Sprints connect to our school improvement priorities and agenda? What are we trying to do as a school? What are the outcomes we're trying to improve? What are the forms of teacher professional learning and growth we're investing in? And how do we make Learning Sprints actually start to be embedded within that school plan, that school agenda for change?

Secondly, how do we integrate Learning Sprints with the other things that are already going on for teacher development and growth? Do you have lesson observations occurring, and could lesson observations occur during the sprint cycles? Do we have instructional coaches or other people who are there to support the capacity building of teachers? How can we pair that work with the Learning Sprints work so that those coaches or those experts are providing advice in and around the Learning Sprints model, and supporting that work. So wherever possible, the goal here is to start to integrate and connect Learning Sprints with the other things you're doing in teacher professional learning.
And thirdly, we want to create opportunities for cross-team learning, where teams that have been working on separate Learning Sprints can share what they've been doing and share how they're actually going about getting an impact on student learning. The embed phase is about taking the time to really integrate Learning Sprints with the other things that are going on. The school plan, the work you're doing on teacher learning and collaboration, and the cross-team type interactions that you're trying to develop across the school.

Lastly, beyond the school during the embed phase, we really encourage you to connect with our national and global community that draws schools. That many schools at this phase are reaching out and connecting with other schools at this stage, sharing what's working, learning from each other, and really accelerating their progress by being networked with other schools. At the end of the embed phase, you really want sprints to be the new normal for teacher collaboration and teacher learning. It should be normal for teachers to come across a problem or practice, and to say to one another, "Hey, why don't we run a sprint on that?" And see whether we can have the impact. Once you're getting those kind of comments, you know you've truly integrated and embedded sprints as an organisational routine for professional growth and collaboration.

Effective implementation of Learning Sprints is about doing the right actions, during the right phase of implementation. As you've understood the four phases of exploring and working out what is the Learning Sprints process all about and how might it be relevant in your context? Moving into experimenting, being willing to implement small to learn fast. Just working with a few teachers to see whether you can make it work. Once you can start to make it work on a small scale, moving to that expanding phase, where you're starting to really accelerate the spread of Learning Sprints, allocating time, really setting the agenda and sharing the positive stories that are emerging. And then making the effort to embed, where you're integrating Learning Sprints with the other things that are going on in your school, so that it becomes an organisational routine.

Each of these phases have key actions and decisions to be made. Don't rush it. Spend the time in each phase. The more work you can do at the early phases, the quicker you can accelerate during that expand and embed phase. Good luck and enjoy implementing Learning Sprints in your unique school context.