



# Introduction

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**T**eaching Sprints is first and foremost about teachers and their learning – the deepening of their pedagogical knowledge, the expansion of their instructional repertoires, and the enhancement of their expertise. While we home right in on teachers and their work, in many ways this is really a little book about improvement.

Whether it's mastering a complex recipe, learning a new phrase in a foreign language, or shaving a split second off a personal best run time, we have all experienced both the grind and the pleasure of improvement. For many of us, achieving new levels of mastery stacks up as one of the most gratifying of all human experiences. While improvement is often rewarding for its own sake, for teachers there is also a clear and moral imperative to improve; we all want to have a greater impact on the students we teach.

For every teacher to have the opportunity to improve, we need approaches to professional learning that work not just in theory, but also in practice. We now know that professional learning has a better chance of being effective if it's school-based, job-embedded, sustained over time and supported by local school leadership (Cole, 2012; Cordingley et al., 2015; Timperley et al., 2007). Stand-alone workshops, conferences and short courses can be useful for building knowledge, but sustainable practice change happens when teachers learn the work by doing the work in the places where they work.

## 2 TEACHING SPRINTS

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### SEARCHING FOR A BETTER MODEL FOR SCHOOL-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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Over years of working with thousands of teachers and leaders, a few recurring questions began to consume our thinking: How can teachers improve practice in a way that is both robust *and* rewarding over the long term? Rigorous *and* manageable? Meaningful for actual classroom practice *and* informed by the best educational research?

Teaching Sprints is one collective answer to these questions.

We've been developing this approach hand-in-hand with hundreds of schools and thousands of educators. Through the process of developing it, we've been grounded by one simple mantra: "*If it doesn't work for teachers, it doesn't work*". Because the Teaching Sprints approach has been field-tested and refined with teachers, it's our great hope that it can work *for* teachers. We are always in search of feedback from colleagues in classrooms, and of course we would very much welcome that from you. For the Teaching Sprints process to be better next year than it is this year, we need to know what clicks, what settles well, and what can be refined.

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We are excited to share this resource with you and we hope it hits the sweet spot for any teacher or school leader – theoretical enough to challenge the way you think about practice improvement, but practical enough to support your work on the ground.

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### FOR ALL OF US, IT'S ABOUT IMPROVEMENT

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In some way, shape or form, all teachers enter the profession ill-equipped for the absolute demands of the job. Indeed, it would seem impossible that any one person could learn all there is to know in any given teacher preparation course. Developing mastery in teaching requires much more than acquiring knowledge – it requires learning from doing.

Once we have been teaching for a while, we all start to “learn the ropes”. We build up habits and routine ways of working in the classroom;

we set expectations, launch into lessons, model problems, check for understanding, and provide feedback. At any moment, our current practices are most likely an eclectic amalgamation of tried and tested strategies, techniques that were modelled by our own teachers when we were students, routines we used when surviving our first few years in the classroom, and approaches we developed by imitating trusted colleagues, mentors and experts. While this mix of approaches invariably gets the job done on any given day of the week, it's worth asking ourselves: *What are the odds that this specific collection of practices represents the optimal way to enhance student learning?* In a job as complex as teaching, the odds will always be low.

So it will always be true that *all* teachers can improve. No matter where you are starting from, we think that every teacher can enjoy the full fruits of developing higher levels of mastery – whether that involves replacing a really good strategy with a better one, or fundamentally rethinking the way you have taught something in the past.

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### THE IMPROVEMENT TRAJECTORY IN TEACHING

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In workshops with teachers, we often begin with a simple prompt for discussion: *What is something you do in the classroom now more effectively than you did six months ago?*

As we move around the room, we hear a range of interesting responses.

The early career teacher very easily brings a long list of examples to mind. “I’ve established much clearer expectations for behaviour, I have strategies to involve the quieter kids in discussions, I am much better at identifying and teaching important background knowledge for comprehension”, and so on.

In contrast, the more experienced teacher may struggle to answer the question. They might sit for several minutes, searching their memories for a practice improvement to share. This teacher may well feel that they’ve been teaching to the absolute best of their ability, but they are often less *conscious* of having improved practice over the last couple of terms.

This observation will make sense to most teachers. We all recall the extreme demands on our learning in the first few years in the classroom;

## 4 TEACHING SPRINTS

some of us reflect with horror on all that we didn't know. Naturally, and mercifully, with years of practice we gain confidence, become more effective practitioners, and automate certain practices. Experience is of course *crucial* to getting better, but in a job as complex as teaching, it is not enough. Without the chance to thoughtfully and consciously learn new things, many of us will experience what teacher and researcher Alex Quigley calls a state of “professional inertia” (Quigley, 2013). We gradually flatten the trajectory of our improvement and, without new inputs, can experience what's commonly understood in the literature as a premature plateau of expertise (Rice, 2013; Rivkin et al., 2005). Sometimes described as a level at which we are “good enough”, this is the point at which more experience alone is unlikely to have a significant impact on performance (Ericsson, 2006, 2008).

You can think about this in the context of your own cooking.

Think about a “go-to” meal you cook – week in, week out – at home. It might be a spaghetti bolognese, a chicken curry, a vegetable stir-fry, or (for the more challenged amongst us) a humble toasted sandwich. Consider how that dish tasted a year ago. You've cooked it countless times since then, but has the quality of the meal noticeably improved? If you've reached a plateau of expertise, it's likely that more experience, by itself, in cooking the dish has not necessarily enhanced the quality of the outcome. That said, you probably recognise that your spaghetti bolognese – *just* as you cooked it last week – does the job just fine.

This poses a challenge for practice improvement in teaching: we know that experience alone will not necessarily improve outcomes, and we know that the practices we use every day are not all likely to be optimal. But just as we do in the kitchen at home, we already use “good enough” strategies for most (if not all) of the things we do in the classroom. Add to this an enormous workload to juggle, and how many teachers can realistically prioritise improvement work in the normal flow of a working week?

A rethinking of school-embedded professional development must start with an acknowledgment of the human demands of teaching and the critically limited time we have to give to improvement work. Teaching Sprints has been built to help teachers (of all experience levels) get going – and keep going – with small, manageable surges of evidence-informed

professional learning, nested in and amongst the pressures of any given school term.

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## THE REALITY OF THE WORKLOAD

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We've never met a teacher with too much time and too few things to do. School terms move at a frenetic pace, and teachers often report feeling overloaded. In this context, it is logical for teachers to focus their energies on getting the job done, rather than working on getting better at *how they do* the job.

There is no judgment here; this just feels like a reality to us. But the danger of living with this pattern – year after year – is that you can settle into “default practices” and flatline in your improvement.

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## A “SPRINTS” APPROACH

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The concept of a “sprint” originated in the technology sector and is used in a broad range of organisations around the world. Thankfully, running a “sprint” in this context involves no physical exercise. Rather we use the term to describe engagement in highly focused improvement work within a tightly framed period of time. While the idea of a “sprint” might be new in the context of teacher professional learning, we think it provides a helpful shared language for describing short, sharp bursts of practice improvement work.

A “sprints” approach to improvement embraces the notion of “massive incremental gains”, where seemingly modest improvement goals become the focus for growth. Applied to teacher learning, this way of working supports teachers to work on truly manageable shifts to practice; when sequenced thoughtfully, these little evidence-informed changes can add up to significant improvement over time.

Given limited time for professional learning in schools, this approach also involves a laser-like focus on only those practices that are supported by the best evidence from the field. Over short stretches of intense improvement work (called “sprints”), these evidence-based practices are prioritised.

## 6 TEACHING SPRINTS

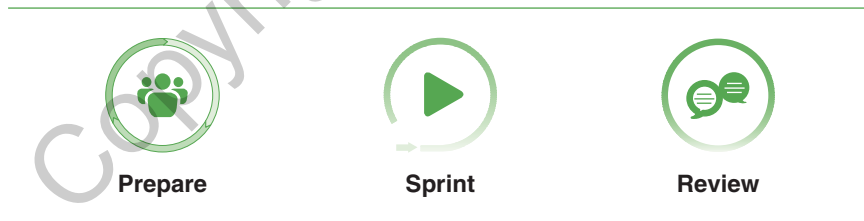
### RUNNING SPRINTS TOGETHER

A wealth of evidence supports the role of disciplined professional collaboration in supporting teacher professional learning (e.g. Campbell et al., 2016; Cordingley et al., 2005; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; Harris et al., 2017). In theory, individual teachers could use a “sprints” approach to pursue improvement goals on their own, but Teaching Sprints is designed to be a collaborative process. Hard thinking and practice-based learning is difficult to do alone; in a social context, teachers can readily share ideas, ask questions, identify challenges to existing practice, draw on the expertise of their peers, and celebrate collective progress. Working together, teachers can also get precise about pedagogical approaches; meaning can be made and shared. So while the notion of a “team” will look different in different schools, we encourage you to embrace the potential of getting better together.

### THE TEACHING SPRINTS PROCESS

The Teaching Sprints process is easy to remember and simple to use. It comprises three discrete phases, shown in Figure 0.1.

**Figure 0.1** The Teaching Sprints Process



1. **Prepare:** In the Prepare Phase, your team determines which area of practice you want to improve. This involves engaging with the “best bets” from the evidence base and agreeing on intended practice improvements. The Prepare Phase ends when all members of the team commit to practising a specific evidence-based strategy in the Sprint Phase.

2. **Sprint:** The Sprint Phase is all about bridging theory to practice. Over 2 to 4 weeks, team members apply new learning in classrooms through intentional practice. Throughout the Sprint, the team monitors the impact of new approaches, and teachers adapt the strategies based on impact. Supported by a simple protocol, the group meets for a quick, focused Check-in to monitor progress and sustain momentum.
3. **Review:** After 2 to 4 weeks in the Sprint Phase, your team gathers again to close out the Teaching Sprint. During the Review Phase, you reflect on learning as practitioners. The team discusses changes to practice, considers the impact evidence, and decides how new learning will be transferred into future practice.

The three phases of a Teaching Sprint enable teachers to learn about, practise and review a small slice of their teaching over a short period of time. Doing a one-off Teaching Sprint can of course have some benefit, but you will find Teaching Sprints more meaningful if you can embed the process as a regular routine for getting better together.

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### HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

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We hope you use this book like a practical field guide. While we feel confident that what we share has strong support from the research base, we have not set out to write an academic article. So with that in mind, if you want to dig a bit deeper into the literature on teacher learning or evidence-based practices, we encourage you to explore the references. At the time of writing, we have tried to draw on what we think is most useful.

This book will not tell you what you should do in the classroom; nor will it prescribe a rigid procedure for you to follow. Rather, it highlights key concepts in practice improvement and describes an *adaptable process* by which teachers can routinely get better at what they do best.

The book has three parts.

In Part 1, we outline three big ideas of practice improvement for teachers. In Part 2, we provide a detailed overview of each phase of the Teaching Sprints process. In Part 3, we walk you through how to get going with a regular routine for collective improvement in your context.