NET RESULTS

ONLINE PROTOCOLS BOOST GROUP LEARNING POTENTIAL

By Alan Dichter and Janet Mannheimer Zydney

Protocols are strategies for having structured communication to enhance problem solving, encourage different perspectives, and build shared knowledge. The protocol process helps professional development leaders build community.

The use of the term protocols by educators became popular in the 1990s. Reformers, needing tools to help them engage in the difficult work of strengthening practice and forming vibrant professional learning communities, began to construct ways of looking together at student and educator work, learning from text, and collaboratively solving problems.

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The Descriptive Consultancy protocol is adapted with permission of the publisher from McDonald, J.P., Mohr, N., Dichter, A., & McDonald, E.C. (2007). *The power of protocols: An educators' guide to better practice* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press. © Copyright 2007 by Teachers College, Columbia University. All rights reserved.

More recently, educators have begun to use protocols to facilitate professional development in online spaces — partly because people need to connect from different places, but also to take advantage of new environments for learning.

For example, asynchronous tools, such as discussion forums, blogs, or Google+, where participants post messages to one another at different times — extending a conversation over a week or two — enable participants to take advantage of additional time to reflect and give more thoughtful feedback.

Synchronous tools, such as WebEx, Skype, or Google Hangouts, allow participants to talk or text at the same time from places all over the world. They can share their own practices immediately through real-time video, for example, showing a classroom in action on Skype. They can also share student work, current teaching dilemmas, and educational issues and, through a protocol, gain insight and become more thoughtful about their practices.

Blended environments, which use a combination of online (both asynchronous and synchronous) and face-to-face time, allow participants to take advantage of different spaces for different purposes. Thus, professional learning leaders can strategize how to maximize the time the group has together physically when a richer and more constructive discussion is needed and use the online spaces when participants cannot get together physically or when they need more time to reflect.

WHY PROTOCOLS?

McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, and McDonald (2013) note that protocols "help us develop the habits we wish we had" (p. 13). By using protocols, leaders and participants are supported in developing the habits needed for a successful community. These habits assure that a time when professionals gather is maximally productive. This is the case for weekly staff meetings, teacher team meetings, retreats, and seminars, regardless of whether they are in person or online.

Protocols are also valuable tools for those seeking to develop facilitative leadership skills and to embed facilitative leadership within an organization. What becomes clear to individuals seeking to lead professional learning communities is that overcoming some initial resistance to working with protocols is going to take work and persistence. The structure of the protocols creates a safe and equitable environment, helping leaders take these steps.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FACILITATOR

Those who seek to lead collaborative organizations know that the notion of a "strong collaborative leader" is not an oxymoron. In fact, it takes great strength and specific skills to successfully lead such a group. What is often referred to as "facilitative leadership" (Hord, 1992) is an approach that many successful leaders adopt.

Facilitation is an important part of any protocol. While protocols are designed for collaborative work and promote shared responsibility, facilitators must always keep part of their focus on the process and goal. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, and McDonald (2007) note: "At its heart, facilitating is about promoting participation, ensuring equity, and building trust. This is true whether the facilitating involves a protocol or another kind of meeting format. The difference is that protocols are deliberately designed with these tasks in mind, while most other meeting formats are rife with opportunities for ignoring them. We all know the result: the faculty 'meeting' that turns into a monologue by the principal or the chairperson, the 'whole-group discussion' that two or three people dominate, or the task force that manages to suppress divergent thinking" (p. 15).

Successful facilitators realize that it would be difficult to facilitate professional learning without paying attention to promoting participation, ensuring equity, and building trust. For example, it's difficult to imagine ensuring equity without having trust. For that matter, it's difficult to imagine building trust without ensuring equity. Some people might think of them as sequential (e.g. first trust and then equity), but when they examine the ideas closely, they are

likely to see that trust and equity are all part of a web of conditions that allows for and promotes interaction and meaningful participation.

Many participants are eager to make sure that a group hears all voices. The skilled facilitator structures the conversations so that this is more than just being equitable with time and making sure as many points of view as exist are heard. Facilitators also want to make sure that the group can come to know more than any one individual in the group can possibly know.

Protocols explicitly value the collective — not over the individual, but because of the presence of the individuals: "When a facilitator promotes a group's trust, it is not to help everyone trust every other individual member as an individual, but rather to help each trust the situation that has been collectively created. The purpose is not trust in general, but trust sufficient to do the work at hand. Nor is the goal to make everyone feel comfortable. Given trust, a group of individuals can learn from one another and their work together even when the work creates discomfort — as work involving worthwhile learning often does" (McDonald et al., 2007, p 17).

While protocols help prevent things from going wrong by providing a structure that participants can trust, things still happen that require intervention. Facilitators using protocols early in a group's development might hear, "Why don't we just talk?" Asking participants to "go with the process" and reminding them that they can share their feedback at the end often helps. It is also about this time when the facilitator who spent a few minutes on norms can reference them, and the facilitator who skipped doing norms remembers why that was a mistake.

LESSONS LEARNED

An important lesson learned when using protocols is never to skip norms. This is particularly important for online groups, which are susceptible to miscommunication because of the lack of nonverbal cues. Online groups need to establish norms for simple logistics, such as when, where, and how frequently to check in with one another (McDonald, Zydney, Dichter, & McDonald, 2012).

It is also particularly helpful in online environments to have a co-facilitator so that one person can focus exclusively on technology issues that may arise and the other can focus on the conversation. While facilitating, it is important for facilitators to listen, take notes, and summarize what they have heard so that participants know they are listening. This is especially useful in online environments, where participants can feel isolated and disconnected from one another (van Tyron & Bishop, 2009).

To wrap things up, the facilitator should also include time for reflecting and debriefing after the protocol. This helps participants be aware of what they have learned and helps the facilitator make changes to improve the experience next time (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003). One of the most important lessons is to take risks and have "the courage, above all, to do business differently, to be a learner, to be a leader, to educate yourself" (McDonald et al., 2003, p. 102).

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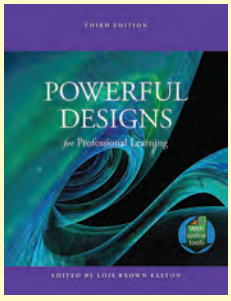

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Alan Dichter (alan.dichter@gmail.com) is the network leader for the CUNY School Support Organization in New York, New York. Janet Mannheimer Zydney (janet.zydney@uc.edu) is associate professor in instructional design and technology at the University of Cincinnati.

ONE PROTOCOL, TWO WAYS

Most protocols are flexible and can be used or adapted for multiple purposes. The Descriptive Consultancy (McDonald et al., 2007), developed by Nancy Mohr, is a variation on The Consultancy, developed by Gene Thompson-Grove, Paula Evans, and Faith Dunne at the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

Consultancies, in all forms, are protocols designed to support collaborative problem solving. One of the key aspects of the consultancy, in all its variations, is that advice, if given at all, is withheld until participants examine the challenge thoroughly. As a professional learning tool, it is one of the best for helping people develop the skill of asking good questions.

The use of probing questions, considered by many to be the most powerful dimension of this protocol, is a skill that practitioners readily apply in all sorts of interactions. The key to a good probing question is to ensure that it helps the person answering to think more deeply about the issue. The questioner shouldn't impose his or her own interpretations or solutions.

Probing questions often help people gain insight into a problem that is far more helpful than suggestions. It is also true that once the presenter shares those additional insights, whatever suggestions are made are far more likely to be on target.

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- Online version, p. 53

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THE DESCRIPTIVE CONSULTANCY: IN-PERSON VERSION

PURPOSE

As with the original Consultancy, the Descriptive Consultancy has two purposes: helping practitioners think through a dilemma that they present and expanding their power to address it. Nancy Mohr liked this variation and used it especially to help groups of educators become facilitative leaders and gain the opportunity to learn how others frame their dilemmas.

DETAILS AND GUIDELINES

The protocol requires about one hour to explore each dilemma, though times vary depending on the number of participants. The setting typically involves either one group of 10 to 12 or smaller groups of three to five meeting in a space where multiple conversations can be carried on simultaneously. Smaller groups — using a more constrained time frame — might consult on all its members' dilemmas in turn.

STEPS

1. Presentation. The presenter describes the dilemma, laying out its different dimensions as he or she sees them, including previous attempts to address it. *(10 minutes)*

2. Clarifying questions. Other members of the group, acting in the role of consultants, ask questions designed to elicit information they think they need in order to consult more effectively. *(5 minutes)*

3. Reflecting back descriptively. The presenter is silent while each of the consultants describes the content of the presentation, beginning with the facilitator's prompt, "What did you hear in this presentation?" The facilitator then adds prompts to spur additional go-rounds in order to ensure the fullest possible description of the problem and its complexities. Such prompts might include: "What seems important to the presenter?" "What, if anything, surprised you?" and "What does this problem seem to be about?" This is also a good time for participants to pose probing questions. Participants in the go-rounds are asked to pass if someone else has already offered their reflection. *(10-15 minutes)*

4. Response. The presenter briefly responds to the consultants' expressed understandings of the problem and provides further clarification of the problem as needed. *(5 minutes)*

5. Brainstorming. The presenter is again silent while the consultants brainstorm possible solutions or next steps, saying things like "What if …?" or "Have you thought about …?" This step often takes the form of open conversation among the consultants, and sometimes in the third person (as if the presenter were not in the same room), a strategy that often helps the presenter listen more fully and the consultants speak more freely. *(10-15 minutes)*

6. Response. The presenter responds again, this time to answer any questions that might have arisen in brainstorming and to acknowledge any shifts in how he or she views the problem. Here, the presenter does not so much answer the group's questions as present his or her new insights gained during listening. *(5 minutes)*

7. Debriefing. The facilitator asks the presenter and participants about their roles: "How did it feel to be the presenter?" or "How did it feel to be the consultant?" The facilitator ends with, "Sometimes people other than the presenter learn something important from the Descriptive Consultancy — something useful in their own context. Does anyone have something to share along those lines?" *(5 minutes)*

FACILITATION TIPS

• When the Descriptive Consultancy is conducted in multiple small groups, the facilitator oversees the process as a whole, having first modeled the process by allowing participants to observe. During the process, the facilitator should monitor groups' use of the steps and intervene if they are not being followed.

• In explaining and monitoring, the facilitator should emphasize the importance of Step 3: Reflecting back a description, rather than making a judgment or proposing a solution. This is a delicate step for the facilitator, who must gently nudge the group to remain descriptive.

• The facilitator should also emphasize Step 4, which involves the presenter's responding to the way the consultants understood the problem. The facilitator might tell the group: "The reason we reflect back and listen carefully to the reflections is to acknowledge that people inevitably have different takes on a complex problem. The power of the Descriptive Consultancy is in learning from these different takes." The facilitator may ask the presenter at the end of Step 4 if he or she wants to reframe or restate the problem at this time.

• Sometimes it is useful for a team to present a problem for consultation. This has the benefit for team members to become clearer about the problem as they think through how to present it.

THE DESCRIPTIVE CONSULTANCY: ONLINE VERSION

PURPOSE

The purpose of the online version is the same as the face-to-face one but allows participants more time to reflect on reframing of the problem.

DETAILS AND GUIDELINES

This online version requires two weeks and works best with groups of up to 10 participants. In the online directions, the facilitator must allow time for participants to ponder the dilemma the presenter describes before posting responses in the discussion forum.

STEPS

1. Organization. Before the first of the two online weeks, the facilitator recruits or invites a member of the group engaged in the Descriptive Consultancy to present a dilemma. With information from the presenter, about a week before the beginning of the two-week long consultancy, the facilitator creates a new discussion forum with the title of the presenters' dilemma (such as "Writer's Block in Adolescent Boys"), a few words to describe it, and directions for the protocol.

2. Presentation. In the meantime, the presenter has pondered the issue and prepared a presentation of the dilemma. ***Within two days of the facilitator's creation of the discussion forum, the presenter posts the presentation of the dilemma as a new thread.***

3. Clarifying questions. Participants, in the role of consultants, read through the problem presented and post a response with any clarifying questions they want to address to the presenter. Answers to clarifying questions address gaps in understanding. Consultants title these "Clarifying Questions." ***These clarifying questions are due two days after the initial posting, and the presenter should answer them by the end of the first week.***

4. Brainstorming. All consultants post a response to the presenter's dilemma. In their responses, they can write probing questions and/or suggestions for possible solutions or next steps. They title these "Probing Questions" or "Suggestions." ***This posting is due in the middle of the second week.***

5. Reactions. The presenter reads the replies to his or her dilemma and posts a reaction to share with everyone. The presenter is encouraged to share any new insights he or she has gained as a result of reading the brainstorming or probing questions and suggestions. This post should be titled "Reaction" as a reply to the original thread. ***The posting is due at the end of the second online week.***

6. Debrief. The facilitator creates a new thread called "Insights," and all participants post a reflection on the problem-solving process. They respond to these questions: "How did it feel to do the consultancy online?" and "Would you use this type of protocol in the future for your own work?" ***This posting is due at the same time as the "Reaction" posting.***

FACILITATION TIPS

- This protocol tends to run smoothly with few interventions, though monitoring for timeliness and attention to directions is always important.
- If coming together is possible, steps 5 and 6 could be done in person.
- It might be helpful to do the face-to-face version first before trying this online version.