CREATE *a* SAFE SPACE *to* LEARN

PROBING ENCOURAGES TEACHERS TO DELVE DEEP INTO THEIR THINKING

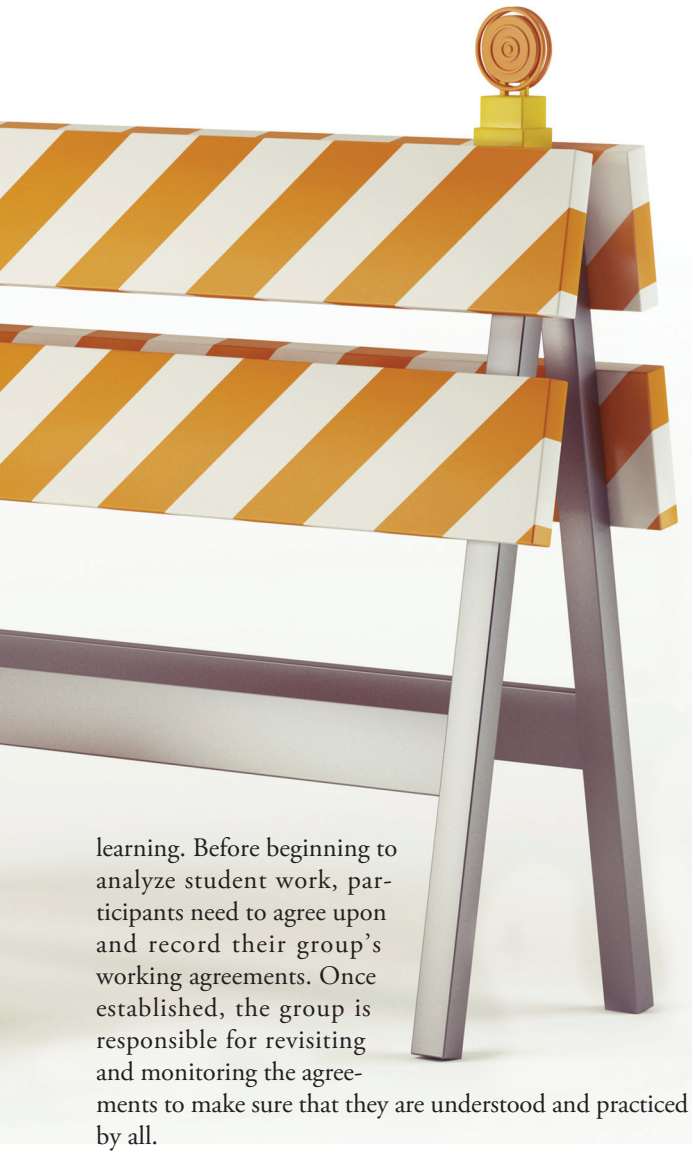
By Amy B. Colton, Georgea M. Langer, and Loretta S. Goff

A collaborative culture of trust and openness is crucial to teachers' learning and the productive analysis of student learning. Teachers engaged in group learning can feel very vulnerable when they share work from their less-successful students.

Trust in fellow group members allows teachers to bring such students' work to the group without fear of being judged or criticized. Openness is required because many solutions require a transformation in perceptions, knowledge, or beliefs. In fact, it is often the old way of thinking about a situation and dealing with it that results in the lack of students' and teachers' success.

Specific working agreements and communication skills provide the psychological safety teachers need to share their perspectives, inquire into those of others, and reconsider what they have been doing and how they have been thinking about it.

Working agreements can be thought of as ground rules that define the behavioral expectations of group members. To maintain trust, group members need to know that they can rely on their colleagues to behave in a particular way. This predictability helps set the stage for all future



learning. Before beginning to analyze student work, participants need to agree upon and record their group's working agreements. Once established, the group is responsible for revisiting and monitoring the agreements to make sure that they are understood and practiced by all.

If working agreements are the ground rules, then communication skills are the tools that group members use to help each other find ways to become as effective as possible with their students. These skills are a necessary part of transformative learning — the consideration and reframing (if necessary) of beliefs and feelings (filtering system) that may be limiting teachers' effectiveness with particular students, especially those whose cultural backgrounds are different from those of the teachers.

To explore this terrain — let alone the possibility that teachers may need to shift their own practice — requires respect, honesty, and a safe place to learn. It also requires specific communication skills that encourage teachers to dig below the surface to consider ideas and perspectives that may not have occurred to them previously.

Although there are many different communication skills that one can use to support collaborative inquiry, six stand out: Committed listening, pausing to interpret, matching verbal and nonverbal cues, paraphrasing, probing, and putting ideas on the table. These six communication skills are integral to engaging in productive dialogue.

Three of these skills — matching verbal and nonverbal cues, paraphrasing, and probing — are types of responses teachers use to help one another analyze and reflect on teaching and learning. Each serves a critical role in promoting and maintaining a trusting environment while also supporting teachers to stay open to new ways of thinking and being.

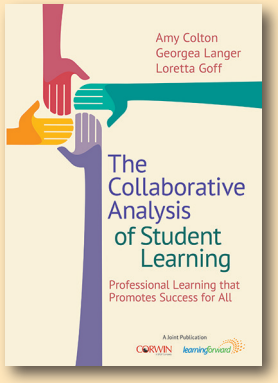
Here we focus on probing — statements or questions that invite a deeper level of conversation about how teachers are thinking about a student's learning.

WHAT IS PROBING?

Three kinds of probes encourage teachers to delve more deeply into their thinking: probing for clarity, empowering probes (presuppositions), and probing for beliefs and feelings.

Probes are used in a manner that maintains the teach-

In their book, *The Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning: Professional Learning That Promotes Success for All* (Corwin Press & Learning Forward, 2015), authors Amy B. Colton, Georgea M. Langer, and Loretta S. Goff outline a professional learning design that emphasizes collaborative inquiry with a focus on cultural diversity and equity. This article, which is adapted from the book, provides an in-depth look at one of the communication skills essential to the collaborative inquiry process.



PROBING FOR CLARITY

Listener asks the speaker to elaborate upon or add specific detail about what was said.

Purpose (intent)

- Moves beyond vague language or generalizations.
- Prompts the speaker to dig more deeply into his or her own thinking.
- Helps the speaker to become more conscious of his or her thought processes.

EXAMPLES

Presenting teacher: "My students really struggle with writing."

Group member: "What have you seen that tells you that they are struggling?"

Group member: "What specifically would you like to see in their writing that would represent improvement?"

Group member: "You mentioned that your students never show their work. How true is this for your entire class? Which ones *do* show their work?"

Group member: "You said you wanted to move your students from using manipulatives in mathematics to paper-and-pencil tasks. Tell me more about how you plan to do that."

Group member: "So, we think that peer editing might be a helpful strategy for Joe. What might that look like, specifically? What do we need to think about to make it most effective?"

er's comfort and avoids a sense of defensiveness. It is important that the intent of the probes always be honorable by communicating respect for the teacher's ability to understand and solve complex learning problems. This means that any teacher offering an idea must never feel corrected or judged. Thus, no suggestions are given — even if they are clothed in the language of a probe — unless the teacher specifically asks for ideas.

Imagine that a member of a study group says, "You just mentioned that Maria is struggling with place value. But haven't you tried manipulatives with her?" The implication is that this teacher has not done enough.

The essence of shared inquiry in a study group is not to fix one another. It is to deepen teachers' knowledge bases and build in one another the capacity for reflective analysis. So, rather than implying that the solution is the use of manipulatives, a group member might paraphrase, then probe for more information: "Hmmm, you mentioned place value. Tell us more about what you have done to try to help her understand place value." The teacher may mention how she used manipulatives in a small group.

The next probe might ask, "How does Maria work in a group? How much does she touch the Unifix cubes when counting?" Through such a conversation, the teacher may discover that Maria's partner is not sharing the cubes, and Maria may not have actually touched them. This leads to a discussion of how the teacher might use student roles in cooperative learning groups to increase Maria's active involvement with the cubes.

In addition to being nonjudgmental, probes need to be *open-ended*. That is, they should require more than a yes or no response. Questions that start with "what" or "how" are usually open-ended and solicit more information. For example, ask, "What have you done to help the mother work with her child?" rather than, "Have you tried sending home a specific assignment?" Or "How might you respond to him the next time he doesn't turn in his work?" rather than "Did you consider how you might respond next time?" In both examples, the open-ended questions invite more information, whereas the latter questions can result in a yes or no answer.

The question that begins with "Have you tried?" contains a not-so-hidden suggestion, which sends a message that the teacher has not thought of that tactic and has not tried it. It is better to find out what the teacher has been thinking and trying *before* others share ideas that might help the situation. Teachers should consider their intent when choosing one of the three types of probes.

PROBING FOR CLARITY

When sharing ideas, even in a study group, teachers often leave out important information. Either the teacher forgets to mention the information or she thinks that you can fill in the missing pieces. You may seek more information about the speakers' feelings, ideas, or thought processes by asking her to rephrase, elaborate on, or get more specific about what was said. Probing for clarity shows that you are interested in what is being said and results in a better understanding of your colleagues' thinking.

Sometimes a teacher may present an idea in a general or vague manner, and you need to ask for more specificity. When learning this skill, it is most natural to combine the probe with a paraphrase. For example, "You mentioned that Joe was having trouble with his spelling *(paraphrase)*. What kind of trouble have you seen *(probe)*?"

One common probe is "Tell me more about that." For example, a teacher might say, "I think the problem might be Mary's attention span." You could respond, "Tell me more about that. What led you to that conclusion?" Such probes invite speakers to

EMPOWERING PROBES (PRESUPPOSITIONS)

Communicates an expectation that the teacher has already considered the question or issue being raised. The group member *presupposes* that the teacher knows something about the topic being talked about but just hasn't explicitly stated it.

Purpose (intent)

- Saves the teacher's dignity.
- If the teacher has not thought about the topic, he or she will think about it.
- The teacher will ask this question of himself or herself in the future *(self-questioning scripts)*.

EXAMPLES

Presenting teacher: "I want them to show me what they know."

Group member: "As you designed this assignment, what student outcomes did you have in mind?"

Group member: "What other ways can you make sure your students have an experience similar to a real author?"

Group member: "How are you planning to draw on the students' cultural background when you read poetry?"

PROBING FOR BELIEFS

Listener helps individuals examine their beliefs.

Purpose (intent)

Asks the speaker to reconsider a belief that may be limiting his or her ability to pursue, discover, and apply responsive equitable approaches for learning so that all students reach excellence.

EXAMPLES

Group member: "You mentioned that Nika just doesn't care and does sloppy work. How do you think Nika feels about his writing?"

Group member: "So, the mother is uninvolved in this student's learning. What might be some reasons for this?"

clarify the details that support what they have said.

Thinking aloud in this fashion is a strong metacognitive tool and helps the speaker become more conscious of and clearer about her thought processes and decisions.

EMPOWERING PROBES (PRESUPPOSITIONS)

Empowering presuppositions raise the speaker's *efficacy* by assuming that he knows (or can figure out) the solution to a dilemma. It empowers him by raising his level of cognitive functioning and building trust (Costa & Garmston, 2002). Garmston and Wellman note, "Assuming that others' intentions are positive encourages honest conversations about important matters" (Garmston & Wellman, 2009, p. 38), which is necessary if dialogue is to grow.

To understand a message fully, the listener has to move below the surface of the spoken words. This is because messages often carry hidden meanings. You may remember times in your life when a parent asked, "Why didn't you do what your teacher told you to do?" The disempowering message behind that question is that you were not very smart and didn't even consider doing what you were asked. Such an accusation might have made you highly defensive and cut off further interaction or analytical thinking.

In fact, you may have been considering doing exactly what you were asked, but, after this comment, concluded that you either were unable to do it or did not feel it was the appropriate thing to do. The problem with such "limiting presuppositions" (Costa & Garmston, 2002) is that psychologically we tend to believe what we are told and act accordingly. When the message is that we are incompetent, we are apt to shut down our thinking and disengage from the conversation.

If the goal of a study group is to maintain trust and encourage teachers to raise their level of analytical thinking, then you need to use probes that suggest *(or presuppose)* that a teacher has already considered the issue being raised. The teacher will tend to live up to these expectations because she unconsciously senses the high regard the listener has given her.

Imagine the following situation. A teacher shares a student's writing from a recent unit on creative writing. The work is of poor quality. One of the study group members concludes (in his own head) that the reason for the poor performance is that the teacher did not provide enough models of high-quality writing.

Rather than suggesting this possibility and creating a defensive atmosphere, the participant pauses to suspend his judgment and decides to see what the presenting teacher thinks. He asks, "What do you believe are some of the reasons for the quality of writing?" The implied message is that the teacher has already considered some possible reasons for what she sees in the work.

In the event that she has not thought about the reasons, she will now consider some ideas or ask for suggestions because she will recognize the value of the question. Chances are, she will also ask this question of herself the next time she reviews students' work.

An empowering probe can also prompt a teacher to ponder an important issue of which she is not already aware. For example, a group member might wonder whether a creative writing

What is the Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning?

The Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning is a professional learning design in which teacher groups analyze student work samples and assessments to learn how to effectively support students' learning of complex academic standards.

Teachers' engagement in the process is driven by their relentless pursuit to discover and apply responsive approaches for learning so that every student reaches standards of excellence. This inquiry extends over a period of months "because deep learning rarely results from a single experience, and teachers need time to conduct longitudinal studies in which they test and reconstruct their current theories of what works" (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Through collaborative inquiry, teachers move away from using uniform best practices toward tailoring culturally and linguistically responsive approaches that meet all students' needs.

Teacher self-awareness is an important part of developing culturally responsive approaches and positive attitudes about teaching and learning. Through structured and facilitated processes, teachers examine their beliefs and practices about teaching and learning. During study group sessions, teachers actively move beyond polite conversations of simply sharing practices toward more in-depth conversations, known as dialogue, about students whom teachers feel challenged to reach and teach (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 1999).

The process reveals assumptions that may limit teachers' capacity to give full attention to students' needs. A systematic inquiry process identifies, tests, analyzes, and refines potential solutions, allowing teachers to find equitable ways for all students to reach standards of excellence.

assignment was culturally appropriate for the students. Rather than saying outright that he thinks the writing prompts that the teacher used were above students' heads, he asks, "How did the students respond to the writing prompts you used? What sense did you get that they could relate to them?"

This implies *(presupposes)* that the teacher can think *(or already has thought)* about this aspect of the assignment. If she has, she can share her thinking. If she has not, she will usually pause and consider this idea. Visual evidence of such deep thinking is evident when a person's eyes look up or sideways. This is how a group member knows that he has asked a really good question.

Then, the teacher might say something like, "Well, now that you mention it, Joe's short, dry response could have been due to that — the inability to relate to the situation I posed." After such an insight, she will be sure to ask herself this question in the future. Her self-efficacy is boosted because the group presupposed that she could figure out an answer to her dilemma by respectfully using probing questions to help her look at a different explanation for the poor quality in the paper.

PROBING FOR BELIEFS

Probes can also be used to help individuals examine the beliefs that get in the way of finding the new understandings required to discover equitable approaches that meet students' learning needs. These probes help teachers step back and evaluate the accuracy of their thinking. Remember that, through dialogue, teachers discover solutions by revealing and examining all assumptions *(untested beliefs)* and positions. Probes for beliefs can help people see, in a dignified manner, how their thinking may be faulty.

Occasionally we find teachers who are complacent or reluctant to give up their views. Sometimes they are so sure their views are correct that they do not want to examine them closely. In such cases, we may use probes that cause cognitive dissonance or "rattle one's brain."

Since these more challenging questions often push a person to go beyond his or her comfort zone, you need to be tactful and sensitive when using such probes. In fact, we recommend that these kinds of probes be left initially to the group facilitator or to those who are most gentle and discerning with their use of communication skills — at least until the group becomes more artful in using communication skills.

The study group process often shakes up teachers' assumptions in a private way as they listen to their colleagues present a point of view that is different from their own. As one teacher said, "After I listened to Carlos discuss how he was not going to give up on Larry, I really had to ask myself this hard question: 'Do I give up too early on a child who is not succeeding?'" She said that her low expectations were "automatic" until this crucial point when she had to rethink her assumptions about a certain child. When she did not give up on her struggling student, she saw him make more progress than she had expected.

Sometimes it is helpful to simply paraphrase the teacher's implied assumptions, especially if you aren't sure what those assumptions might be. You might just say, "It sounds like you think Joe is lazy." Although the teacher did not say this directly, it was implied, and now he has a chance to clarify or expand.

You might choose a more direct route and say, "I'd like to stop for a minute and check to see what you were thinking or assuming about Joe." This message implies that you believe the

teacher is aware of his assumptions, in itself an empowering presupposition that may encourage him to take a second look at his thinking. Or you might ask, "What makes you feel the situation is hopeless?" This might provide some insight into why the teacher feels so discouraged. Once the assumption is out in the open, the group can use communication skills to help the teacher explore its validity.

Another way to ask someone to examine his or her assumptions or beliefs in a nonthreatening manner is to ask the person to consider alternative perspectives — different ways of interpreting the same experience. Consider the case of a middle school teacher who says, "The mother doesn't care about her daughter's education because she never comes to parent conferences." The teacher seems to be making the assumption that parents who don't attend conferences don't value their children's education.

In this case, you might ask, "What other explanations might there be for the mother not attending conferences?" This is a gentle way of calling into question the teacher's beliefs. If the teacher shows little willingness to see the situation differently, you might tell the group that the teacher has said the mother doesn't care about her child's schooling and ask, "How do the rest of us see that?"

The group can then explore other explanations for the mother not attending conferences — for example, that the mother works at the scheduled time, that she may have had bad experiences with school personnel as a child and is not comfortable coming to school, or that she is from another country and doesn't understand what is being asked of her. After the group discussion, the teacher may find that another interpretation of the mother's behavior is more fitting.

Viewing the world from someone else's perspective helps teachers challenge their own beliefs. You might ask, "How do you think the mother thinks or feels about this issue?" This kind of probe asks the teacher to look at the situation from the perspective of the mother and may yield useful insights — for example, that the mother is intimidated and needs more guidance. Viewing the world from multiple perspectives increases a teacher's *cultural proficiency.* It also helps the teacher to learn that there may be many different causes for the same behaviors.

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Continued from p. 37

handle things and my teachers can learn to handle things. In the end, the kids win."

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