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Tools FOR SCHOOLS

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS

PROTOCOLS:

A facilitator's best friend

BY LOIS BROWN EASTON

Protocol. Hearing the word makes some people think of formal dinners or White House etiquette. Others might think of the Kyoto Protocol and treaties among countries. For scientists, the term describes an exact procedure, for physicians, a practice they follow. In the field of education, protocols are simply an agreed upon set of guidelines for conversation. They are a code of behavior, a *modus operandi*, for groups to use when exploring ideas.

Educating students for a complex world requires powerful professional learning, such as action research, lesson study, and tuning protocols (Easton, 2008), that helps educators reach the next level of excellence in their practice. Used within collaborative groups, protocols can help educators change the culture of school so that all adults and students improve their learning.

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF), whose members developed, refined, and share many of the protocols in use today, says that the structure of a protocol permits "a certain kind of conversation ... which people are not in the habit of having" (www.nsrfharmony.org).

By following accepted parameters for conversation, group members can have very focused conversations. Protocols help educators look at student work, artifacts of educator practice, texts relating to education, or problems and issues that surface during educators' day-to-day lives. The result of using protocols to structure the dialogue within these parameters is an increased and shared understanding among group members that can lead to deeper understanding and action. Protocols also may push people into places they

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COVER STORY

Protocols: A facilitator's best friend

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have avoided: real issues that, resolved, can make the difference between a school that succeeds and a school that fails the students it serves.

The newly released "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Professional Development in the U.S. and Abroad," by Linda Darling-Hammond and a team of researchers at Stanford University's Educational Leadership Institute, says that teachers need in-depth, sustained, coherent, high-quality professional development to be able to address the daily challenges of teaching and improve student learning. The study points out that teachers in nations whose students consistently outperform the U.S. on international standardized exams routinely engage in professional learning that requires them to collaborate to create and review lessons together, observe one another teaching, offer each other feedback, and assist in selecting and developing curriculum and assessments.

For a complete copy of the report "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad," see www.nsdc.org/stateproflearning.cfm.

NSDC'S BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

The study from the Stanford team is the first phase of NSDC's "Multiyear Study of the State of Professional Learning in the U.S.," supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the MetLife Foundation, and The Wallace Foundation. The study's purpose is to challenge educators to find ways to improve their professional learning. Protocols can be tools that allow educators to do just that.

OUT OF THE CAVE

Protocols can help bring teachers out of isolation. Accustomed to their side-by-side caves, many fear exposing to peers their classroom practices by sharing strategies and student work. Protocols help such educators feel enlightened by providing the structures and support for difficult conversations.

Most protocols are facilitated in some way, either by an outsider or a group member. Group members also may share facilitator responsibilities. The facilitator often structures the conversation so that discussion deepens as participants take turns listening and speaking.

Effective protocols call upon participants to agree to a set of common assumptions. For example, some groups might agree that:

- We all want to get better in the work we do as educators.
- We all want to be kind and courteous, *and* to accomplish this, we also need to be thoughtful, insightful, and provocative.
- We need to remember that we are "in this together." Although we may be focusing on one teacher's work, what we are doing will reach far beyond that one classroom and the work that teacher is sharing. We are exploring *our* work as educators, and the outcome will be improved learning for all of us and our students.

These assumptions lead to specific behaviors participants agree on so that members do not feel attacked and the conversation is substantive and provocative without being hurtful to any individual.

Protocols allow groups to have a professional conversation, one that might go awry if allowed to proceed either through inconsequential meanderings (Aunt Felicity used to do that very thing when she was a teacher — was that in Ohio or Iowa? What a character she was!) or unfocused battles where one person's comment is met by another's objection. What ensues is a verbal pro and con, attack and counterattack, argument and counterargument. No one else can get a word in — nor, after awhile, do they want to. The conversation literally derails, with wreckage everywhere, particularly the ideas of those who never got to speak. Deep understanding seldom occurs when a conversation turns into a wreck.

Some educators may prefer professional development in the form of "show 'n' tell" sharing, "make 'n' takes" for their next class activity, or speakers with thrilling ideas that may not ever make it to practice. Protocols are effective tools for deepening the conversation so more meaningful professional learning can occur, resulting in changes in practice so that all students learn.

As the study by the Stanford team tells us, meaningful collaboration among teachers is the key to higher student achievement. Protocols give form to educator collaboration. ■

SOME BASICS OF PROTOCOLS

WHO: Job-alike groups (grade levels, for example) or mixed-job groups (cross-disciplinary groups) can engage in protocols, as can administrators when on equal footing with other participants. Groups can meet regularly, such as in professional learning communities, or form just for a protocol. Groups need a facilitator in early stages; mature groups can facilitate themselves.

WHAT: The protocols in this issue help groups look at a text, such as "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad." They also may be used to examine student work and educators' practices or to understand problems or issues.

WHEN AND WHERE: Most protocols require about an hour. Protocols, like other forms of powerful professional learning, are best when school-based, but can also bring together teachers from throughout a district or across districts.

WHY: Protocols can help *individuals* calibrate notions of quality, learn new strategies for teaching, become better learners themselves, and plan and revise the work they do. Protocols can help *schools* focus on excellence, address issues and problems, and improve both the daily work of learning and long-term work related to vision and mission.

HOW: Consider time already set aside for professional learning or meetings, such as faculty, grade-level, or department meetings. Use other means to convey information about traditional business items. Use protocols for learning during district-allotted professional development days, or shorten or extend the school day for professional development time. The study revealed that teachers in high-performing countries have regular time each day for such collaboration.

TO BEGIN: As with most innovations, start small. Start with people who are "early adopters," the ones who are like scouts for a wagon train, forging new trails. Invite them to read the study, for example, and to react to it using one of the protocols in this newsletter. Provide or ask someone to provide refreshments. Let others know what you are doing, and ask for time to share what your group is learning.

Learn more about NSDC's purpose at **www.nsdc.org/connect/NSDCpurpose.cfm** and NSDC's Standards for Staff Development at **www.nsdc.org/standards/index.cfm.** Use NSDC tools to help you advance the quality of professional development in your school.

NSDC's web site **(www.nsdc.org)** provides additional information and resources for high-quality professional development.

NSDC **TOOL**

Wagon Wheel

Purpose: To stimulate thinking about a text, connect participants, and generate ideas for further action.

Materials: Chart paper, markers, a copy of "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad," available at www.nsdc.org/stateproflearning.cfm (select either the longer technical report or shorter overview depending on the time frame and group).

Time: 45 minutes or longer, depending on length of selected text.

Preparation

1. Read the study and select four key ideas for participants to explore. Copy or provide summaries of each of the ideas in a packet placed on participants' chairs.

2. Place four chairs back-to-back facing outward. Place four additional chairs in an outer circle, each facing a chair on the inside hub. Place paper and a pen on each seat with the study packet.

Directions

1. Have each participant take a seat. Explain that each person will work with four different partners to explore key ideas in the study and brainstorm future actions. Ask group members to take notes on both their own and their partners' ideas.

2. Allow time for each pair to read a section of the study or the prepared summary. The pair then should reach a common understanding of key ideas and brainstorm what those ideas might look like in their own system or school context.

3. Rotate pairs by having those in the outer circle move one seat to the right. Each pair then addresses the second topic.

4. Continue the discussion and brainstorm for each of the four topics.

5. Have the group summarize responses to each topic and key ideas for action.

6. Create focus groups to further explore a specific topic and to plan how to put the powerful ideas into action.

Source: Adapted from the National School Reform Faculty protocol. See www.nsrfharmony.org for additional protocols and information.

Three Levels of Text

NSDC **TOOL**

Purpose: To construct meaning collaboratively, clarify, and expand thinking about a text, from written document to videotape to podcast, using increasingly specific descriptions.

Time: As little as 20 minutes depending on the size of the group or extended for as long as there is time. (It should be extended if the text is long and complex or if there are more than 10 people in a group.)

Materials: Text, such as "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad," available at www.nsdc.org/stateproflearning.cfm; chart paper; markers.

Preparation

The ideal group is six to 10 people. Divide larger groups and select a facilitator for each table group, along with a room facilitator to keep time and move the group along. Designate a recorder to chart ideas. Have participants read, view, or listen to the text, taking notes.

Directions

1. **Sentences** *(about 10 minutes)*
- Each member of the group shares a sentence from the text or from his/her notes about something that struck that person as particularly significant. Others listen and perhaps take notes. There is no discussion.

2. **Phrases** *(about 10 minutes)*
- Each person shares a phrase from the text or from notes written about the text on something that struck that person as significant. Others listen and perhaps take notes. There is no discussion.

3. **Words** *(about 10 minutes)*
- Each person shares a word from the text or from notes written about the text on something that struck that person as significant. Others listen and perhaps take notes. There is no discussion.

4. **Discussion** *(about 10 minutes)*
- Group members discuss what they heard and what they've learned about the text being studied. The group discusses which words emerged and new insights about the document.

5. **Debriefing** *(about 5 minutes)*
- The group debriefs the process.

Source: Stevi Quate and Lois Easton, based on National School Reform Faculty text-based protocols.

NSDC **TOOL**

Success Analysis Protocol

Purpose: To examine professional practice to gain an understanding of the reasons behind successes related to professional learning and then to examine these successes with the research report, "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad" to improve and apply strategies to future work.

Time: 2 hours to 4 hours, depending on number of participants.

Materials: Chart paper; markers; tape; notepads; pens or pencils; the study, available at www.nsdc.org/stateproflearning.cfm.

Preparation *(15 minutes)*

Share with participants a definition of success: a process that was highly effective in achieving its intended outcome. Ask each participant to prepare a "case" by reflecting on something he or she has done right. The case should specify the facts of what the participant did as well as reflection about what might have contributed to the success.

Directions

1. **Divide into groups** *(about 5 minutes)*
- Divide into equal groups of three to four (or more in each group if there is time, as each person will present in the group). Groups can be self-selected, randomly assigned through numbering, job-alike, or purposefully diverse.

2. **Sharing** *(about 5 minutes)*
- One participant in each group agrees to go first, sharing his or her case orally as well as in writing (if available). Other participants are silent and take notes.

3. **Clarifying questions** *(about 5 minutes)*
- Others in the small group ask clarifying questions to understand the case being presented. Clarifying questions are those that can be answered by facts.

4. **Analysis and discussion** *(about 10 minutes)*
- The presenter of the case listens and takes notes as the others discuss the case, surfacing their insights about why the practice was successful. Participants discuss what the presenter did to make the situation successful, as well as other contributing factors. They may want to describe how what was done is different from typical practice.

5. **Reflection** *(about 10 minutes)*
- The presenter reflects aloud on what colleagues said to pinpoint reasons the practice was successful. Other group members silently take notes. Before going on to the next case, participants should take a moment to appreciate the success of the presenter.

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Success Analysis Protocol, *continued from p. 6*

6. **Continued rounds** *(each round is about 30 minutes)*

- In each group, the next participant shares a case. The group follows the above sequence of steps and continues until each group member has presented a case.

7. **Compilation** *(about 5 minutes)*

- Each group writes the factors that contributed to success on a piece of chart paper. Small groups do a "gallery tour" of the pieces of chart paper, noticing what's similar and what's distinctive about each small group's list of factors in success.

8. **Discussion** *(about 10 minutes)*

- The large group discusses common factors and unusual factors in the success cases. They also may discuss aspects of the cases that surprised them. They might discuss elements that undergird the factors of success, such as the school culture, an administrator's philosophy, or a teacher's leadership.

9. **Review** *(30 minutes)*

- Read the shorter version of the report and consider which successful traits are supported by the research.

10. **Response** *(15 minutes)*

- Consider:
  - How were our successes like the findings in the study?
  - How were they different?
  - What did we learn from the study about the kind of professional learning we experience in relationship to what others experience in the U.S and beyond?

11. **Debriefing** *(about 5 minutes)*

- The facilitator invites participants to reflect on the utility of the process and continue their discussion of the content.

Source: Adapted from Daniel Baron of the National School Reform Faculty, with credit to Vivian Johnson.

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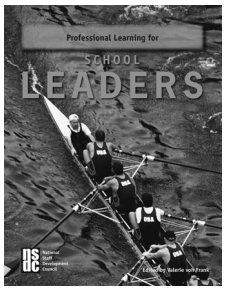
School leadership is essential to achievement

"How much does leadership matter? Anyone who doubts the importance of a school leader need only look at a review of studies examining the effect of leadership on student achievement, done by McREL researchers J. Timothy Waters, Robert Marzano, and Brian McNulty (*Educational Leadership,* April 2004). They conclude that quality leadership contributes to raising student achievement by as much as 10 percentile points compared with schools with similar student and teacher populations."

That paragraph opens the introduction to NSDC's latest book, *Professional Learning for School Leaders.* This addition to the Topics in Professional Learning library describes what effective leaders do through real examples. Articles from past issues of *JSD* and NSDC newsletters are selected here to describe school leaders who have created cultures and environments that have successfully raised student achievement. One section of this volume specifically focuses on examples of schools and districts with professional learning for school leaders.



Professional Learning for School Leaders
Edited by Valerie von Frank (NSDC, 2008)
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Leadership requires that leaders be crystal clear about their values and purposes, speak powerfully and compellingly about those values and purposes, and persist in the face of resistance. This book offers a clear picture of sound leadership: school leaders engaged in deep thought and reflection to distill what they value into a succinct vision.