Using Protocols to Deepen Collaboration

Judy Carr

A protocol consists of agreed upon guidelines for a conversation. This type of structure permits very focused conversations to occur. We use protocols for looking at student and adult work, giving and receiving feedback, solving problems or dilemmas, observing classrooms or peers, to push thinking on a given issue, and to structure a discussion around a text.

—National School Reform Faculty

The principal is no longer the lone leader in the school. Lead teachers play critical roles in making decisions that support improved student performance. For example, lead teachers may work as instructional coaches, professional learning community (PLC) facilitators, and demonstration or lab classroom teachers who demonstrate best practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Lead teachers work with a variety of existing and new groups in schools to nurture and facilitate development of genuine professional learning communities that, for example, plan together, use data, design assessments, and collaboratively examine student work. Within schools, groups re-forming themselves as PLCs might include

Departments. In high schools, teachers who teach the same subject area often work collectively to plan curriculum, share assessments, and analyze data to improve student learning results.

Teams. Middle school organization is frequently team based. Teams are typically made of two to five teachers who share a group of students, plan together, and communicate with parents and colleagues on other teams in the school. They are able to look across subject areas to assess student learning strengths and needs.

Committees. Many tasks in schools are carried out by committees, representative groups working together in either short-term or long-term commitments to analyze data, revise curriculum, plan professional development, select exemplars of high-quality student work, and choose textbooks, technology resources, and online tools.
Governance Councils. Representatives of various subgroups (e.g., departments or teams) within the school meet regularly with the principal to make decisions that affect the life of the school community as a whole.

Learning Teams and Study Groups. Educators within the school who share a common interest or question (e.g., how to raise student achievement scores, how to improve the instruction of reading) meet over an extended period of time to examine and resolve the question that has brought them together.

Because many teachers are used to working alone or to working in unproductive groups that are more congenial than collegial (Carr, Fauske, and Rushton, 2008), new structures are needed to help build new ways of working together. A key issue for administrators and teacher leaders working with small groups of colleagues is keeping focus on improving student learning. When there is no structure in place that highlights the focus and purpose of a decision-making group of educators, and there is no set process to follow, interactions within a group can devolve. Often, unstructured discussions become complaint sessions about students, colleagues, or the work environment. “Structured dialogue is an effective practice for supporting the growth of educators. In a study involving two urban schools (Hollins, 2006), structured dialogue helped the teachers involved move from focusing on the students as the problem to an increased focus on how teachers could take responsibility for the learning of their students.” Protocols are most effective when used over time in existing groups such as those listed above (National School Reform Faculty, n.d.).

Lois Easton’s book, Protocols for Professional Learning (2009), organizes protocols into four broad areas that are central to the work of educators who strive to improve the learning and performance of students:

1. Protocols for examining student work
2. Protocols for examining professional practice
3. Protocols for addressing issues and problems
4. Protocols for effective discussions
Advantages to Using Protocols for Professional Learning

Carr, Herman, and Harris (2005) identified several advantages that result from using protocols to embed adult learning and reflection into the work of the school:

- Protocols create a common language for the agreed-upon area of study. Teaching is filled with jargon (i.e., close reading, graphic organizers, inquiry-learning, and so on). Because individual group members might have very different perceptions about such strategies, it is important to agree on and use common terminology. For example, consider a district that is using a protocol to craft student assessment profiles. These profiles paint a picture of student performance at three points during the school year. Because teachers are using a common language, they can clearly communicate and agree on what is being assessed and taught, and they can successfully select common assessments that all are happy with.

- Protocols support the practice of new techniques, including those inherent in collegial feedback. For example, mentors in a New York district practice observation techniques employing the process clearly defined in the protocol. Then they share observation tools and discuss questions at mentor meetings to refine their skills.

- Protocols can guide teachers working to resolve specific issues and concerns. For example, English teachers in a central Vermont school meet for two hours every six weeks and use a protocol to examine student work to solve issues related to teaching practices. Substitutes are scheduled to allow teachers to meet during the school day.

- Protocols help teachers to refine skills and strategies initially introduced in professional workshops or courses. For example, a group of intermediate teachers from a school district participate in a weeklong summer literacy workshop. They hold meetings four times during the school year and use a protocol to problem-solve implementation issues.

- Protocols for using and evaluating data, often classroom assessment data, can provide crucial feedback for teachers. Teachers then use data to refine teaching practices during the year.

- Protocols can be used to help set targets for improvement. Teachers use data for statewide assessments, for example, to set targets for action planning.
Protocols provide defined purposes, norms, timeframes, and steps to carry out a particular interaction among colleagues (Easton, 2009). They require skilled facilitation and, at the same time, the clarity of the structure of each protocol supports both the facilitator and the group in being successful.

**Finding Protocols for Different Purposes**

A variety of types of protocols have been developed. For example, the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) has posted an expansive collection of protocols (http://www.nsrfharmony.org/protocols.html) that can be used by teachers and administrators in schools. There are protocols to support learning communities, materials to explore equity, and tools for inquiry into topics and ideas. NSRF also provides protocols to support reflective dialogue and to support collaborative experiences, such as team building and related exercises.

Consistent use of a small number of protocols will deepen the work of teacher leaders, provided the protocols are selected for their tight connection to the purpose of the group’s work. Teacher leaders working collaboratively to improve students’ learning will find that protocols support them in terms of their work together as a group as well as in their individual work in classrooms.

**References**


