



Center for Leadership & Educational Equity

A Rationale for Protocols

Developed by the Southern Maine Partnership

The word “protocol” has taken on a more specific meaning in education in recent years. **In the context of educators working to improve their practice, a protocol is a structured process or set of guidelines to promote meaningful and efficient communication and learning.** Gene Thompson-Grove writes, “[protocols] permit a certain kind of conversation to occur — often a kind of conversation which people are not in the habit of having. Protocols are vehicles for building the skills — and culture — necessary for collaborative work. Thus, using protocols often allows groups to build trust by actually doing substantive work together.”

Many protocols involve one or a small group of presenting educators and another small group of “consulting” educators. The Tuning Protocol was one of the first, and that term is sometimes used as a generic term for many similar protocols. Protocols are sometimes modified by their users, but it is highly recommended that users try them exactly as they are written several times before making modifications.

Why should we use a process for communication that feels so artificial, awkward and restrictive?

This is probably the most frequently asked question about protocols. There are two “rules” in many protocols that seem to cause the most discomfort; they are worth regularly acknowledging before using these protocols with educators:

1. In many protocols there are restrictions on when the presenting educator(s) can talk and when the consulting educators can talk; almost everyone feels awkward at first when told they “can’t talk now.”
2. In many protocols there is a segment during which the consulting educators talk among each other, purposely leaving the presenter(s) out of the conversation — in the third person — almost as though they were not present!

Benefits

However, both of these restrictions have benefits, as described below. The bottom line is that using protocols almost always increases learning, even for those who generally don’t like the structure, by:

- giving the consulting educators time to listen carefully to the entire presentation without needing to quickly generate questions or comments;
- giving the presenting educator(s) time to simply listen and write (during feedback time) without needing to think about providing eye contact or immediately responding to consulting educators;

- having time limits that make it less likely that a small number of individuals will dominate the air time; and
- providing guidelines that safeguard the vulnerability of presenters who put some of their weaknesses “on the table”; these guidelines make it safe to ask challenging questions of each other.

Of course, guidelines alone are not enough to safeguard vulnerability. Participants still need to be considerate in how they speak. “Cool” or “hard” feedback may be evaluative in nature, but it can be heard much better if it’s expressed in the form of a question or with some qualification and a measure of humility, e.g. “I wonder if...”, rather than “I think you should...” Doing this implicitly acknowledges that the consulting educator doesn’t know the context of the situation well enough to tell the presenting educator what they should do. Passionate discussion is wonderful as long as the tone is collegial; self-monitoring of tone of voice and body language is important to maximize learning. We don’t want to shut people down when we’re trying to support them opening up.

As with all protocols, the facilitator should move the group to the next section of the protocol before the allotted time is up if the group seems ready. In addition, the group can give more time to a section before the protocol begins, and the group may want to give the facilitator some flexibility to add a small amount of time to a section during the protocol.

Remember, the point of a protocol is to have an in-depth, insightful conversation about teaching and learning, not to do a perfect protocol.