



Center for Leadership & Educational Equity

Why Protocols?

Developed in the field by educators.

What Are Protocols?

- A protocol consists of agreed upon guidelines for a conversation. It is the existence of this structure, which everyone understands and has agreed to, that permits a certain kind of conversation to occur — often a kind of conversation that 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.

Why Use a Protocol?

- A protocol creates a structure that makes it safe to ask challenging questions of one another; it also ensures that there is some equity and parity in terms of how each person's issue is attended to. The presenter has the opportunity not only to reflect on and describe an issue or a dilemma, but also to have interesting questions asked of them, AND to gain differing perspectives and new insights. Protocols build in a space for listening, and often give people a license to listen without having to continually respond.
- In schools, many people say that time is of the essence, and time is the one resource that no one seems to have enough of. We have been experimenting with protocols as a way to make the most of the time people do have.
- It is important to remember that the point is not to do the protocol well, but to have in-depth, insightful conversation about teaching and learning.

How Do Protocols Work?

Protocols set boundaries for our conversations. Protocols set aside time specifically for listening, noticing, thinking, and speaking. The following are basic elements or stages of many protocols that are designed to provide the members of the group time to listen, notice, think, and speak.

Presentation

At the beginning of most protocols, **the presenter shares context and details** about some aspect of their work with the group. This may include written documents, data, or a sampling of student produced work. At the end of the presentation the presenter offers a **focusing question** that will guide the protocol to follow. Group members are silent during the presentation.

Clarifying Questions

Clarifying questions have brief, factual answers. They ask the presenter “**who, what, where, when, and how.**” These are not “why” or “what other approaches have you considered” questions. They can be answered quickly and succinctly, often with a phrase or two. The purpose of clarifying questions is to help the questioner better understand the presenter’s situation, and as such, are not likely to offer any “food for thought” to the presenter. The facilitator of the protocol will ask group members to pose clarifying questions and the presenter responds.

Group Discussion

The group talks with one another while the presenter listens silently and takes notes. It is helpful for the presenter to pull their chair back slightly from the group where they can more easily “listen in” and take notes without feeling the need to give eye contact or any other kind of response to the speakers. The group talks about the presenter in the third person, almost as if they were not there. Another tactic is to focus the discussion on the work that the presenter has brought. So the conversation is not about the presenter but about the work. As awkward as this may feel at first, it often opens up a richer conversation, and it is only for fifteen minutes or less! It is the group’s job to offer an analysis of the situation; it is not necessary to solve the problem or offer a definitive answer.

Presenter Response

During this time the presenter thinks out loud about what were, for them, **the most significant comments, ideas, or questions they heard** during the group discussion. They might also share **any new thoughts or questions** that emerged for them while listening to the group.

Reflection/Debrief

It’s important to give everyone a chance to talk about the process and how it went – both as a way to learn what works for the group, as well as to reflect individually on the skills necessary for engaging in reflective dialogue. Often hearing other perspectives on the process helps people see the value of using a structured protocol.

In some protocols you will find additional features or modifications of the above steps that have been designed for a specific purpose. For example in the Collaborative Assessment Conference Protocol there is no initial presentation by the presenter and in the Consultancy Protocol, there is an additional step of posing probing questions. And when using the Tuning Protocol, warm and cool feedback is offered about the extent to which the presenter’s work aligns to stated goals.