Introduction

Part of your adventure in becoming a professional learning community (PLC) is the opportunity to use a variety of protocols. You'll find them an ideal vehicle for holding the professional conversations that need to occur in PLCs—conversations that will lead to increased student achievement and motivation. You'll be delighted to discover that the protocols themselves serve as a kind of cofacilitator (along with you) for these professional conversations. They will animate your professional learning community.

A few descriptors will help you get started on your adventure. Protocols are

- Processes that help groups achieve deep understanding through dialogue.
- Structures for groups that allow them to explore ideas deeply through student work, artifacts of educator practice, texts relating to education, or problems and issues that surface during the day-to-day lives of educators.
- Guidelines for conversation based on norms that everyone agrees upon in order to make the dialogue safe and effective.
- A facilitated set of steps which everyone understands and has agreed to that permits a kind of conversation that people don't usually have when they discuss things.
- A constructivist approach to discussion that allows for deep development of ideas as certain people talk while others listen and then the talkers listen and the listeners talk, with each round characterized by reflection and exploration.
- A way for educators to build collaborative communities, sometimes called critical friends groups (CFGs) or professional learning communities (PLCs).

Protocols help educators achieve trust and create a culture that is essential for collaborative work on issues of substance. You can't wait until the culture is "perfect" to engage in protocols; it is through their use that the culture will develop and trust will emerge. The structure and norms, such as warm and cool feedback, of the protocols, combined with actions that are in accordance with the assumptions that undergird protocols, lead to a collaborative culture willing to engage in substantive dialogue.

As with PLCs, you begin to engage in protocols with people who are most ready to take the journey with you. Your fellow travelers are the early adopters, the scouts in the adventure—they'll want to answer your invitation to the journey with a hearty "yes!" Let the word spread—share at faculty, department, and grade-level meetings what you are learning through the protocols. Model at meetings. Create a blog. Send out e-mails. Issue direct invitations.

1
What Protocols Are and Why to Use Them

Protocols in Action

Dave, a science teacher, brought several science portfolios for his interdisciplinary team to examine. Though each portfolio was more than 30 pages long and bulky with drawings and charts, Dave assured us that we didn't have to read them all in depth. Nor did we have to assess them. He requested that we use the Tuning Protocol for our discussion—a process for fine tuning what we do as educators by examining student work or artifacts of teacher practice (such as lesson plans).

Because we knew each other well and met regularly, we indulged only in "checking in" as a starting activity. Dave began with these words:

"I'm really proud of these portfolios. I think that—at last—I've found a way to link curriculum, instruction, and assessment, all in this one format, the portfolio. Things make sense to me, and also to my students. I'd like to take you through one portfolio while you look through the others. They follow the same format."

Dave opened the portfolio he had kept and took us through it as we looked at the ones in front of us.

"Here's the problem: I'm not sure that portfolios stimulate students to think at the highest levels. I'm not sure what levels of Bloom's taxonomy are represented in these portfolios, but I suspect that only the three lowest are. I definitely want science students to be analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. So my key questions are these: What can you tell me about the levels of thinking in these portfolios, and how can I be sure that student work reflects the higher levels of thinking?"

Dave gave the group the remaining 8 minutes of his 15-minute time period to pore through the portfolios. We did so quietly, although we had questions and were beginning to test some hypotheses. We knew that during this part of our process, we were to say nothing; Dave had the floor, even though he was staying quiet so we could examine the portfolios. Janelle, who was serving as facilitator and timekeeper, told us when Dave's time was up. "Let's go on to clarifying questions," Janelle said.

Raul asked the first question. "How long have you been doing portfolios in science, Dave?" Dave replied that he started on them in February of last year. Other group members asked clarifying questions until the time was up.

Figure 2.1 **Artifacts and Protocols for Different Types of Questions**

Focus of Question	Appropriate Student Work to Examine	Appropriate Teacher Work to Examine	Appropriate Protocols to Use
Effectiveness of a task, assignment, or prompt	3–5 samples at different levels of achievement	Copies of the task, assignment, or prompt	Tuning, reflecting on learning expedition plans
Individual student's strengths, deficits, understanding, etc.	Single sample or multiple samples from an individual student	(Focus is not on teacher work, but relevant pieces may be brought in as references)	Collaborative assessment conference, modified collaborative assessment conference
Effectiveness of an assessment tool	3–5 samples at different levels of achievement	Copies of rubric, scoring guide, or criteria	Tuning
Alignment of curriuclum, instruction, or assessment with standards	3–5 samples at different levels of achievement	Copies of standards and curriculum task or assessment instrument	Tuning, standards in practice
Teaching issues	(Samples of student work as appropriate to illustrate issue)	Written/oral description of issue and other documents as appropriate	Consultancy
Equity issues	Class set or samples from students in different subgroups (e.g., gender, race)	Copies of standards, task, assignment, rubric, etc. that relate to issue	Tuning, slice, consultancy

Note: Reprinted by permission of the publisher. From A. Weinbaum, D. Allen, T. Blythe, K. Simon, S. Seidel, and C. Rubin, *Teaching as Inquiry: Asking Hard Questions to Improve Practice and Student Achievement.* New York: Teachers College Press. Copyright © 2004 by Weinbaum, Allen, and Blythe. All rights reserved.

Who Can Participate in Protocols?

Everyone and anyone can participate in protocols, including any of the following:

- Classroom teachers
- Specialists
- Building administrators
- Paraprofessionals
- School staff
- Students
- Parents
- Community members
- District board members
- District administrators
- State board members
- District staff
- State department of education staff
- Policymakers
- U.S. Department of Education staff
- Educators from other countries
- University and college faculty
- Staff from organizations that support educators (e.g., Boards of Cooperative Education Services [BOCES]) and teacher centers

Protocol groups can either be impromptu or regularly scheduled. In an impromptu protocol, the facilitator may want to devote time at the beginning for group members to get to know each other.

3

Success Analysis Protocol

Source: This protocol was designed by Daniel Baron, who was codirector of the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF). Baron expressed appreciation to Vivian Johnson, who inspired this protocol.

Overview: Sometimes protocols focus overmuch on dilemmas or problems, so this protocol is a nice way to celebrate successes without the vapidity of "show and tell." Participants work to understand why something is successful and create cases of professional practice that demonstrate successful decision making or problem solving. They collectively gain an understanding of reasons for success in order to apply these strategies to future work.

Number of Participants: Any number of people can participate in this protocol, working in groups of 3 or 4. A facilitator is needed to keep all subgroups working smoothly. No one person is a presenter; several people are.

Time Required: 45 minutes to 2 hours

Steps (suggested times based on a 60-minute session):

Step 1: Preparing Cases (can be done ahead of time; otherwise, add 15 minutes)

- Each participant prepares a "case" by reflecting on something that has gone right. The case should be specific about all of the facts and reflective about what might have contributed to the success (including what the participant did).
- Participants may welcome a definition of success as they prepare, either before coming to the group or as part of the group's process. "Success" can be defined as effectiveness in achieving the intended outcome.

Step 2: Getting into Groups (5 minutes)

- The facilitator has the entire group divide into equal groups of 3 to 4 (more in each group if there is time, as each person will be presenting in the group, and more people means more presentations and more time required).
- These groups can be self-selected, randomly assigned, job-alike, or purposefully diverse.

Step 3: Sharing (5 minutes). One of the participants in each group agrees to go first, sharing his or her case orally and in writing (optional) while the rest of the group listens and takes notes.

Step 4: Clarifying Questions (5 minutes). Participants in each group ask the presenter questions to help them gain more understanding about the case. These are clarifying questions only (i.e., those that can be answered by facts).

Step 5: Analysis and Discussion (10 minutes)

- While the presenter in each group listens quietly and takes notes, the others discuss the case, venturing their insights about why the case was successful. They should discuss what the presenter did to make the situation successful, as well as other factors.
- Participants may want to describe how what was done is different from typical practice.
- In a variation of this protocol, the presenter converses with the others, answering questions and offering opinions.

3
Peeling the Onion Protocol

Source: This protocol originated with the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF). I have modified it here.

Overview: This protocol is good to use when someone has an issue that needs to be addressed. The presenter does not necessarily need to be the one who is dealing with the issue directly, but merely someone who wants to engage in the discussion. He or she should prepare to share as much as possible about the issue with others—history, context, impact, and so forth—and come up with one or two key questions that focus the issue. A pair or group of people may function as the presenter. The presentation and the focusing question(s) become the "text" of the protocol.

Number of Participants: 6–10, plus a presenter and facilitator

Time Required: About 55 minutes (not counting the initial introduction and orientation)

Steps (suggested times based on a 55-minute session):

Step 1: Introductions and Orientation (first time only; 5 minutes). If the participants don't know each other, be sure they introduce themselves. Make a copy of this protocol and share it with participants, going through the steps and noting the times for each.

Step 2: Describing the Issue (10 minutes)

- The presenter describes the issue as fully as possible while participants are silent and take notes.
- The presenter distributes any written materials related to the problem or issue.
- The presenter asks one or two key questions, which the participants write down.

Step 3: Writing (3 minutes). The participants and presenter free-write on the issue and the key question(s). The presenter then withdraws from the group to listen and take notes as the participants discuss the issue, making it their own and wrestling with it.

Step 4: Discussion (10 minutes)

- The facilitator (or a participant; it's up to the group) selects one of the discussion prompts below.
- Participants respond to the prompt, but not in round-robin style; instead, they thoroughly discuss each response to the prompt before moving on to the next response. They may concur, differ, offer comments, ask questions, suggest examples, or provide details.
- The presenter remains silent and takes notes.
- This step is then repeated using other prompts for as long as there is time.

Here are some prompts for use during this step:

- What I heard [the presenters say] is . . .
- One assumption that seems to be part of the problem is . . .
- One thing I assume to be true about this problem is . . .
- A question this raises for me is . . .
- Further questions this raises for me are . . .
- What if . . . ?
- Have we thought about . . . ?
- I wonder . . . ?